Over-representation of Aboriginal Students Reported with Behaviour Disorders

A report to the

Ministry of Education - British Columbia

Aboriginal Education Branch
and
Special Programs Branch

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McBride Management Ltd.

Principal Researcher: Shirley R. McBride, Ph.D.
Assistant Researcher: William McKee, Ph.D.

April 2001

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Acknowledgements

The researchers gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the staff in the school districts who were selected as a sample in this study. Thanks to the senior district personnel who arranged for access to the random selection of files, made on-site arrangements during the data collection process, and gave so generously of their time in providing insights during interviews. The ready access to information in the district and the assistance with logistics were and are very much appreciated.

We also extend our appreciation to the many Aboriginal community representatives who volunteered their time to participate in focus groups and who shared their understandings with us so openly.

The collective wisdom of school district personnel and of the Aboriginal community members who participated in the study gives us hope that despite the many issues that exist, the collective potential to address them ultimately bodes well for students.

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Report on the

Over-representation of Aboriginal Students Reported with Behaviour Disorders in British Columbia

BACKGROUND

Over-representation of Aboriginal students in populations of students with special needs has been well documented both in research literature and in the data collected by the Ministry of Education of British Columbia in its student-level data collection system.

This over-representation is greatest in the area of behaviour disorders where the reported incidence among Aboriginal students in British Columbia is approximately 3.5 times that of the general K-12 student population.

The Ministry recognizes students with behavioural disorders in three separate categories. However, the study was limited to the category of "Severe Behavioural Disorders" because

- it represents the most serious level of behavioural difficulty
- it was likely that there would be a longer history which could be reviewed to determine the points at which intervention was or was not effective
- this category is not "capped" for funding purposes, thus providing for a more complete reporting of the total student population within this group
- there is no historical precedence for restriction of the category to any particular age or grade level
- it provided the most time and cost-effective means of examining the issues in greater depth

PURPOSE

The purpose of the current study was to gain a better understanding of why there are large differences in the proportions of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students reported in "behavioural disorders" categories and the impact the identification has on learners.

An improved understanding of the reasons for the disparity is intended to better prepare both the education communities and aboriginal communities to provide more effective interventions for Aboriginal learners, and to provide a basis for partnership between these communities for the education of Aboriginal students.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

The study was designed to examine reasons for the over-representation of aboriginal students in programs for students with behavioural disorders in British Columbia, with a view to identifying effective practices and determining ways that education communities and aboriginal communities might provide more effective interventions.

Methods

A review of existing literature across a number of disciplines was conducted, and a summary of the 278 research publications prepared.

Data were collected from;

- student files (150 student files, 120 of Aboriginal students reported with severe behaviour disorders (SBD) as of September 2000 and an additional 30 files of students who were reported in September 1999 and had exited the program by September 2000 in eight sample school districts across British Columbia were reviewed)
- Aboriginal focus groups in each of the eight districts
- interviews with senior school district staff in the eight districts.

Student Characteristics

The final sample was 149 students. The students in the sample ranged in age from 6-20 years. There were 106 males and 43 females. The largest group was in the Junior Secondary grades.

- Generally, boys were first determined to be having some difficulty while they were in the primary grades, while on average this happened about 3 years later in the case of girls. It was some time later that the students were reported as having a severe behaviour disorder (11.3 years of age for males, 14 years for females).
- Most students did not live with both parents. About 34% lived with their mothers,, and 38% with guardians (either a member of the extended family or with foster parents). Twenty-six percent were in care at the time of the file review. Several others had histories of being in care but were now back in the care of someone in their family.
- Most of the students had high levels of absenteeism (average 18.5 days per year) and many had changed schools and districts several times in the course of their schooling.
- About half were initially referred because they had academic as well as behavioural problems.
- Most displayed externalizing behaviours - acting out, oppositional, and often aggressive or violent. Some were involved with drugs or alcohol, a few were described as depressed.
- About 15% were diagnosed or suspected of having FAS/FAE and 25% with ADHD.
- Sexual abuse was confirmed in just over 5% of cases and of cases and suspected or under investigation in about 3.5% of cases.

Assessment and Pre-referral Review

On average, about half of the files had a record of classroom assessment of basic skills. Approximately 55% contained an assessment of cognitive ability and almost 68% contained a norm-referenced assessment of academic achievement.

Assessment of cognitive ability used a variety of assessment scales, the most common being the Wechsler scales. In the vast majority of cases results were interpreted with great caution acknowledging the cultural factors which could impact results.

Specific behavioural assessment activities were an area of general weakness in the assessment process. About 10% of cases contained evidence of functional assessment and about 35% used some type of behaviour rating scale. Generally, these were simple checklists. There was little evidence of the use of more sophisticated assessments or multiple-observation strategies.

About half of the files contained some review or summary of the student's history to the point of referral. School-based teams were involved in pre-referral planning in about 60% of cases, with significant differences in practice between districts ranging from 52.4% to 100%.

Program Planning, Implementation, Review and Evaluation

About 80% of cases had a current Individual Education Plan (IEP) on file, and 70% contained evidence of behavioural goals. Key elements of the IEP were evident in 64.4% of files, and responsibilities for implementation were identified in 63.1% of files. There was congruence between the IEP being on file and some evidence of program implementation and review. However, only 42.3% showed evidence of program evaluation.

Parent Involvement

Based on evidence in student files, level of parent involvement appeared to be low in general at the pre-referral, assessment, IEP planning and IEP implementation stages, although there were statistically significant differences across school districts in all areas.

Community and Inter-Agency Involvement

There were statistically significant differences across school districts in the extent to which Aboriginal Bands, Aboriginal service agencies, and other Ministries were involved. The Ministry for Children and Families had some involvement in just over half of the cases, and at least one other agency was involved in 72.5% of cases.

Students No Longer in Program

There were no statistically significant differences between students who had exited programs for SBD and those who were currently in programs. Two of the 30 had returned to regular class. Most had moved to programs with less intensive service. Some had been moved to other special education categories as the result of further diagnostic information.

Qualitative Data in Student Files

A large percentage of students were identified as troubled from the beginning of their school careers, and many had developmental levels on school entry that made them ill-prepared for school. Poverty was often an element in their histories. The number of risk factors in most cases was predictive of behavioural difficulty based on what is known about the development of behaviour disorders in empirical research.

Interview Themes

There was a high level of congruence in the way in which Aboriginal focus groups and school district personnel saw many of the issues in the education of aboriginal students generally and in addressing the behavioural problems in particular.

While there were variations in some issues from group to group, there were themes that ran through all interviews and focus groups. These included:

- importance of active engagement of Aboriginal community in planning and implementation of district educational programs
- history of residential schooling and its impact on the ability of aboriginal people to re-establish their culture, develop parenting skills, and develop a social environment conducive to emotionally healthy, successful children.
- residential school experiences that perpetuate fear of authority, mistrust of school as an institution, and inability of many Aboriginal families to be effective advocates for their children.
- examples of systemic racism and stereotyping.
- need for a workforce in education more representative of the student body
- need for staff training and awareness of Aboriginal culture and of the implications for educating Aboriginal children
- importance of school leadership in creating a supportive school culture and establishing working relationships with the Aboriginal community
- support for First Nations Support Workers and examination of their role in creating school/family/community linkages
- rural-urban differences in challenges faced
- role of the school in developing self-esteem and pride in culture
- need for earlier intervention and improved school readiness for Aboriginal students
- need for systematic and sustained response to early evidence of academic and social difficulties
- difficulties in elementary-secondary transitions
- ineffectiveness of school suspension as a strategy for addressing behavioural problems.

Staff in school districts described a range of programs and services provided. Often these vary from school to school as well as among districts.

Most school boards in the sample have instituted some type of consultative process with Aboriginal communities. Their perceived effectiveness varied across Aboriginal focus groups.

District personnel identified things that they would like to see changed; Aboriginal groups made specific suggestions regarding information that might be useful to educators and to Aboriginal parents.

Implications

The report identifies what district personnel and Aboriginal groups perceive as effective strategies and identifies areas in which empirical research validates these strategies. These include:

- open and transparent consultative processes
- involvement of the Aboriginal community in solution-finding
- development of cultural competency in the school community
- enhanced parental involvement
- earlier and more focussed intervention for behavioural difficulties
- improvements to assessment and planning processes
- need for better cross-disciplinary teamwork
- resiliency-building
- more systematic attendance records

Implications for the Aboriginal community are identified in the areas of

- partnering with school boards
- development of parenting skills
- attention to early language development
- attention to school attendance

Implications for teacher education programs centre around recruitment of Aboriginal students into teacher education programs and issues of program content.

Conclusions

The report concludes that even though much work needs to be done to prevent and address the over-representation of Aboriginal students in programs for students with behaviour disorders, prospects are hopeful because there is a high level of agreement about what needs attention, as articulated by school district personnel and Aboriginal focus groups.

Approaches in districts that appear to be having higher levels of success are identified.

DATA COLLECTION

Information for this study came from four sources:

- A review of related literature (278 pieces of research were reviewed).
- A review of 150 files of Aboriginal students reported with severe behaviour disorders
- Interviews with senior district personnel in the sample school districts.
- Focus groups from the Aboriginal communities in the same districts.

Detail regarding each of these sources follows.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevant literature was reviewed across a range of related topics, in the first instance those related to the general issues of behaviour disorders – related factors and early indicators of behavioural difficulties, identification and assessment of children and youth with behavioural difficulties, and successful or promising practices in prevention and intervention.

The literature in this area is extensive and crosses fields such as education, psychology, pediatrics, psychiatry, epidemiology, child development, sociology, and social work. We have not listed all possible research in these fields, but selected as much as possible articles which are representative and/or provide overviews or meta-analyses of the broad range of material and the "big ideas" which flow from these bodies of work. Topics related to behaviour disorders that we researched included:

- correlates, risk factors and early indicators of behavioural difficulties
- characteristics of students with behavioural difficulties
- identification and assessment of behavioural difficulties with an emphasis on these processes in terms of potential bias
- prevention/intervention strategies appropriate for students behavioural disorders, particularly as they relate to Aboriginal groups where such research was available.
- long-term consequences of behavioural disorders
- development of resiliency in children
- contributions from family and community
- child-centred wrap-around services.

Following the more generic research about behavioural difficulties, the writers sought to identify literature that specifically relates behavioural issues to Aboriginal children and youth, and about the impact of cultural differences on behaviour, and about characteristics of culturally competent individuals and organizations in service delivery.

The cross-over between the above two areas of research is not extensive. This observation is borne out by other researchers. (Artiles & Trent, 1994). The current study has identified an area where considerable further empirical research is needed.

The researchers made a special effort to identify empirical evidence from Canadian, and particularly British Columbia sources although these were not extensively available.

The full literature review and the 278 bibliographic references can be found in APPENDIX A.

SELECTION OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Eight school districts of varying size and geography enrolling a significant proportion of Aboriginal students within the Province were selected for the study. Site visits to each of the school districts occurred in the period December 2000 through March 2001.

The geographical dispersion of the districts was:

Lower Mainland	2
Fraser Valley	2
Vancouver Island	2
Interior	2

Districts ranged in size from approximately 5,200 to over 60,000 in total student enrollment.

Across the eight districts, the percentage of Aboriginal students in the total student population ranged from 2.5 % to 18.8%. Table 1 shows the number and percent of Aboriginal students compared to non-Aboriginal students across the sample districts compared with provincial data.

TABLE 1

Number and Percent of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Students in Sample Districts and Province (99/00 School Year)

	Number	% in Sample Districts	Provincial Percent
Non-Aboriginal	165,903	94.7	92.8
Aboriginal	9,345	5.3	7.2
TOTAL	175,248		

The proportion of non-Aboriginal to Aboriginal students reported with Severe Behaviour Disorders (SBD) in the selected districts is shown in Table 2

TABLE 2

Proportion of non-Aboriginal to Aboriginal Students in SBD in Sample Districts (99/00 school year)

District	% Non-Aboriginal	% Aboriginal
1	0.3	1.5
2	0.8	1.7
3	0.7	2.2
4	1.1	2.5
5	1.2	4.2
6	0.8	4.3
7	1.1	7.1
8	0.9	7.1

The sample of students with severe behaviour disorders (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) reported as of September 30, 2000 in the selected districts closely resembled the Provincial picture, as shown in Table 3:

TABLE 3

Number and Percent of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Students with Severe Behaviour Disorders in Sample Districts and Provincial (99/00 School Year)

	Number SBD Reported	Total	Percent	Provincial Percent
Non-Aboriginal	1,263	165,903	0.8	0.8
Aboriginal	286	9,345	3.1	3.5
TOTAL	1,549	175,248	0.9	

SELECTION OF STUDENT SAMPLE

Slightly over 1500 Aboriginal students were reported as SBD in the Province during the 1999-2000 school year. The rate of turnover of students reported in SBD from one year to the next is relatively high (in the order of 40% in some cases). Because of this, it was decided to draw the sample from students reported as of September 30, 2000 in the Ministry of Education's student-level data collection system. Sample selection was delayed until these data were available.

From the eight districts, a total of 150 students were randomly selected from the student-level data collection system. This represents 10% of the target population for this study, and is considered to be statistically adequate sample size. Of the 150 students, 120 were reported in programs for students with Severe Behaviour Disorders (SBD) as of September 30, 2000. A further 30 students had been reported in SBD programs the previous year but had exited and were still in the B.C. public school system at the time of data collection. A number of alternates were added in the event that the students were no longer in the system at the time of data collection.

In all, 155 files were reviewed. For six of these the data were sufficiently incomplete to exclude them from the final sample. Thus, the final sample for purposes of this report is 149 students (119 currently reported as SBD and 30 previously reported who have exited).

FILE RECORD REVIEW PROCESS

School boards in British Columbia are required to maintain student records for each student registered in the district. When a student is reported as having a special need, such as in the case of a student with Severe Behaviour Disorders, school boards are required by Ministerial order to develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for the student, to consult with the parents in the process of the IEP development, and to deliver an educational program in accordance with the plan. Appendix F contains a copy of the current Guidelines for this category and the requirements of relevant Ministerial Orders.

In determining the process for collecting student record information, the research was guided by the work of Walker et.al. (1991), who observed:

> School archival records are a primary means for documenting a student's school history and accumulate systematically during the student's school career. These records represent a rich source of data and information about academic performance and school adjustment.

The School Archival Records Search (SARS) Procedure was reviewed but it was determined that it was not totally suitable for use in the current context because it is set in the context of American legislative requirements and because the purpose of the current study went somewhat beyond the SARS format. However, the general approach was thought to be useful, and a student level data collection sheet was developed which incorporated several of the features of SARS.

A detailed review of the student records (cumulative records and any other student files or file inserts) was conducted to determine:

- school history leading to the placement of the student in the SBD category.
- precipitating factors and behaviours
- presence of related conditions such as FAS/FAE
- the assessment process and tools used to make the identification
- involvement of parents/guardians and the Aboriginal community in prevention, intervention and implementation of strategies
- involvement of other agencies
- family variables

goals within the IEP

- goal attainment since initial placement.
- current status of the learner

A copy of the data collection form used to review the files can be found in APPENDIX B.

ABORIGINAL FOCUS GROUPS INTERVIEWS

Focus groups included Aboriginal leaders and representatives of the Aboriginal community in the eight same districts. These interviews were conducted to determine congruence with the perceptions of school district personnel and to determine what other practices these Aboriginal communities believed could be effective in supporting Aboriginal students, preventing behavioural problems and addressing behavioural disorders.

The composition of the group varied dependent on the Aboriginal community. Groups included such individuals as Band Chief, Band Education Coordinator, parents, representatives of Native Friendship Centres, Metis Societies, and Aboriginal personnel who were employed in various positions in the school districts.

Focus group interviews averaged two hours or more. Average group size was 6 people.

Detail regarding the focus group questions and protocol can be found in APPENDIX C.

DISTRICT PERSONNEL INTERVIEWS

Interviews were held with senior school district staff to determine the practices, procedures, policies and approaches taken by districts that appear to have differing outcomes for Aboriginal students. Some of the interviews were conducted via teleconference while others occurred on-site. One interview, because of technical and scheduling difficulties, was conducted using e-mail communication supplemented with telephone discussion.

Participants for the interviews were determined by the school district following initial contact with the office of the Superintendent. Personnel participating varied across districts and included Superintendent/Assistant Superintendent, Directors of Instruction, District Principals, Coordinators and in some cases school-level personnel directly responsible for program delivery.

Generally, interviews were about two hours in length or more.

A copy of the interview protocol and questions can be found in Appendix D.

WHAT THE STUDENT FILES YIELDED

There were significant differences among districts in the student records in the methods of recording information, the content of the student files, and the completeness of records. Some districts had recognized that these inconsistencies were creating difficulties for them in developing a picture of students who required intensive intervention, and were making efforts to systematize their processes. In other instances, records were far less consistent and complete, even in the recording of basic information such as school attendance. These limitations are identified in the interpretation of the data.

In general, the files of elementary students were more complete and better organized than those for secondary students, and record-keeping more systematic.

CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENT SAMPLE

The final sample consisted of 106 males and 43 females from grades 1-12 (including secondary ungraded, and ranging in age from 6-20 years. The sample by district is shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Number and Percent of Aboriginal Students in SBD in the Sample by District

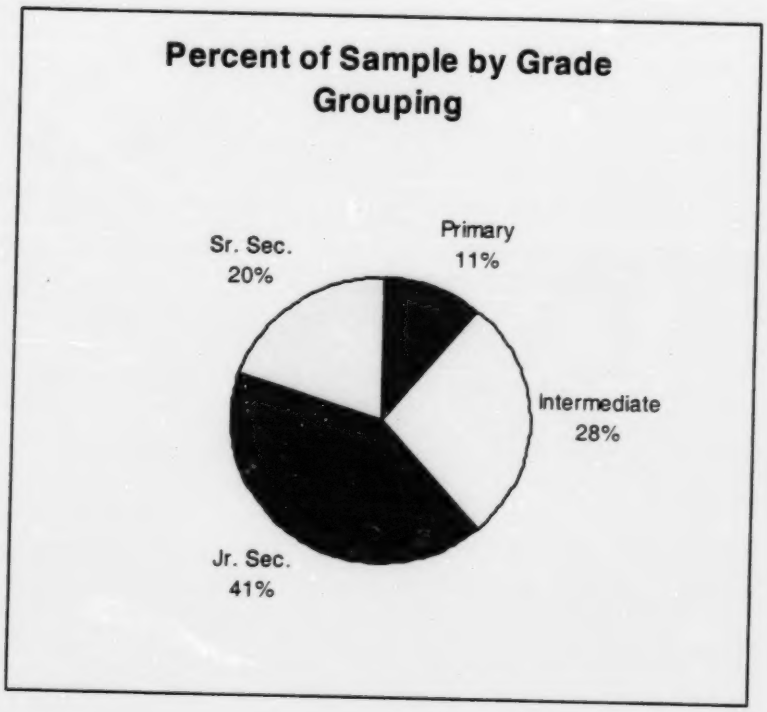
Sample District #	Number in Sample	% of total Sample
1	29	19.5
2	9	6.0
3	10	6.7
4	17	11.4
5	23	15.4
6	18	12.1
7	21	14.1
8	22	14.8
Total	149	100.0

Grade Distribution of the Sample

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the sample by grade groupings Grade-by-grade detail can be found in Table A in APPENDIX E.

The largest groups of students in the sample were in Junior Secondary grades.

FIGURE 1



Age Distribution

The sample ranged in age from 6 years to 20 years. The mean age was approximately 13 ½ years. Detail is shown in Table 6.

Over one-half of the samples were 13 years or younger and 20% of the sample were students aged 17 – 20 years.

TABLE 5

Age Distribution of Sample as of September 30, 2000

Age	Frequency	Percent
6	2	1.3
7	3	2.0
8	8	5.4
9	9	6.0
10	9	6.0
11	11	7.4
12	14	9.4
13	5	3.4
14	18	12.1
15	18	12.1
16	23	15.4
17	14	9.4
18	11	7.4
19	3	2.0
20	1	0.7
TOTAL	149	100.0

Interestingly, female students in the sample were, on average, significantly older (mean age – 15.2 years) than their male counterparts (mean age – 12.9 years).

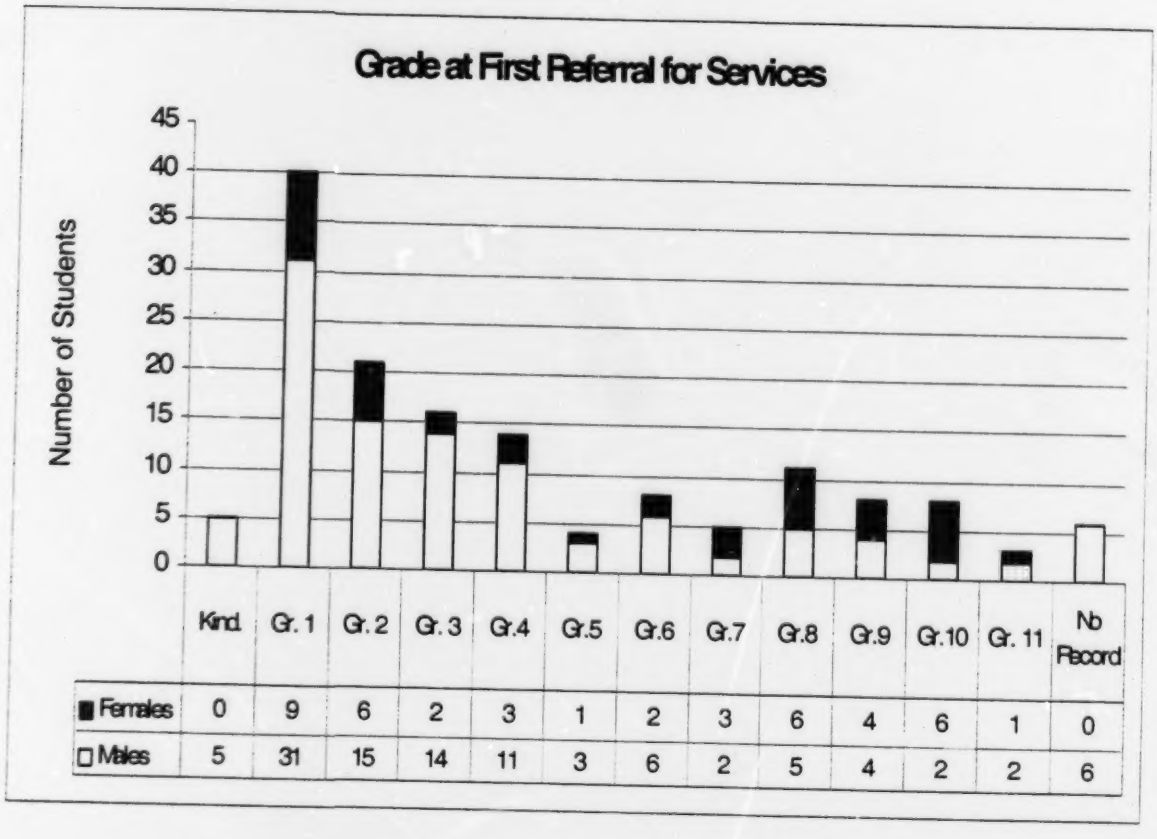
Identification

Figure 2 presents the distribution of grades in which files indicated male and female students in the sample were first referred for special education services. This includes any type of additional service beyond the classroom, including Learning Assistance, Speech and Language Therapy Services, Counselling, or any other support service.

The median grade at which females are first referred is grade 6, whereas the median for boys is grade 2. The gender differences were relatively consistent across districts, as shown in Table A, APPENDIX E.

Over 60% of boys had been identified and having difficulty while they were still in the primary grades, compared to about 40% of the girls.

FIGURE 2



Mean grade at the time of first referral across sample districts ranged from a mean of 2.5 to 5.2 with a mean of 3.9 as a grade equivalent. District differences were not statistically significant.

Table 8 shows the distribution of ages at which the students in the sample were first identified as having Severe Behaviour Disorders. There is a significant difference in the age at which male students are identified (mean age 11.3 years old) compared with female students in the sample (mean age – 14 years old).

In this analysis, there were a significant number of cases for which the first year of identification was unclear. Some students came from other Provinces and there was therefore no data in the Ministry of Education data set to establish this. However, in most instances transferees came with some background information, and in some cases relatively complete files, to suggest that they had emotional/behavioural problems prior to their arrival in the B.C. school system.

TABLE 6

Age at Date of Identification as having Severe Behaviour Disorders

Age	Frequency	Percent
5	1	0.8
6	4	2.7
7	9	6.0
8	15	10.1
9	5	3.4
10	9	6.0
11	9	6.0
12	10	6.7
13	12	8.1
14	12	8.1
15	17	11.4
16	9	6.0
17	9	6.0
18	3	2.0
19	1	.7
Unknown	24	16.1
TOTAL	149	100.0

Living Arrangements

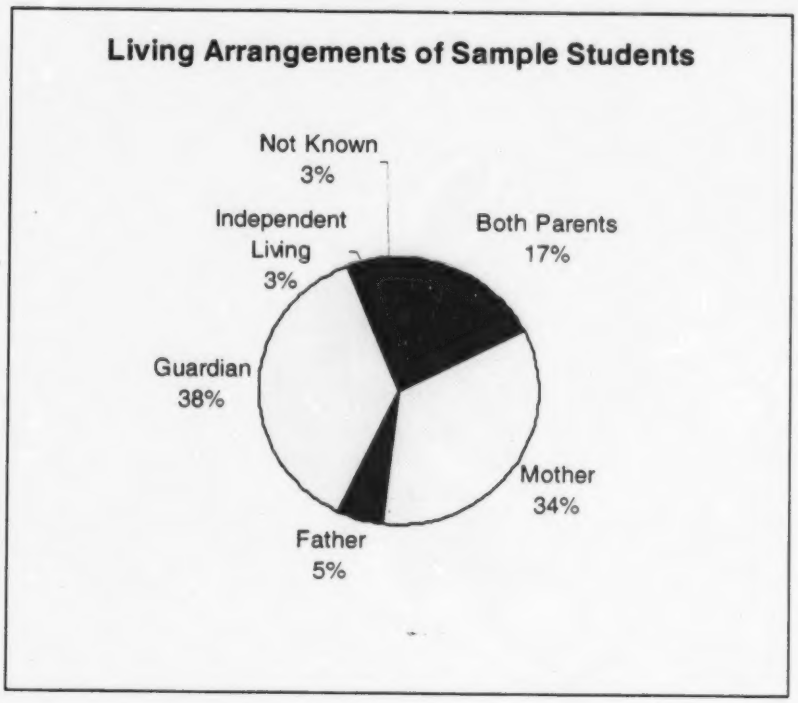
Chart 2 shows the distribution of living arrangements for students in the sample as of September 30, 2000. Table B in Appendix E provides numerical detail.

While these data show a current snapshot at a single point in time, it is perhaps the qualitative data that are more relevant to the behaviours of these students. Tracking histories case by case, it becomes evident that the living arrangements for many of the students have been less than stable over time. Arrangements often include moving from home to home living with one parent or another or with a relative (often a grandmother), or movements between family members and foster placements. Even when one parent (generally the mother) was a constant, family configurations changed through a series of relationships. Sometimes these had a positive effect on the student's behaviour, and sometimes behaviour deteriorated.

Thirty-nine students or 26% of the sample were reported to be in care of the Ministry of Children and Families at the time of file review. Historical records showed several other students had at some point been in care but were now back with their parent(s), generally with the mother but sometimes with another family member.

FIGURE 3

Living Arrangements of Students in Sample – September 2000



Attendance

Records of school attendance were incomplete in most instances. Only 20% of students in the sample had complete records of attendance for all years they had attended school. For more than 50% of the files sampled, three or more years of attendance data were not recorded. Generally, these data were better for elementary grades.

Despite these limitations, the researchers believe that the data from the years that were available are relatively representative of student attendance in the sample. If anything, the data available represents an under-estimate of school attendance, because the general pattern on entry to secondary schools was one of increased absenteeism, and it is these schools for which the least amount of data was available.

Often, there were anecdotal notes regarding major difficulties with school attendance in the secondary schools, but numerical data were not available in the cumulative record.

High levels of absenteeism, and a large number of changes in schools and school districts attended, characterized the sample of students in the review.

Average number of days absent was computed for each student based on years for which attendance data were present in the student record. Across the sample, students ranged from an average of 2 absences per year to 97 days absent per year. Overall, students in the sample missed an average of 18 1/2 days each school year.

Absence of five or more days per term is a common indicator of students at risk for school failure. (Robertson, 1997).

The mean and median number of days absent for students across grade levels is displayed in Table 7.

TABLE 7

Days Absent for Sample Students by Current Grade Placement

Current Grade Placement	Mean # days Absent	Median # days Absent	Number of Students
2	19.8	17.6	5
3	22.3	17.3	8
4	14.4	11.3	6
5	13.9	11.5	11
6	20.2	20.0	6
7	18.1	15.3	12
8	28.4	28.3	16
9	18.7	16.8	26
10	18.4	16.9	14
11	15.5	14.8	21
12	19.1	22.0	3
Secondary Ungraded	12.5	8.3	5
OVERALL	18.6	16.4	133.0

Mobility

As noted previously, the students in the sample also experienced a significant number of school and school district changes over their school career. Students in the sample range have made as many as 17 changes in schools over their career and made as many as 8 changes across school districts.

The distribution of school and school district changes for students at various grade levels in the sample are summarized in Table 8.

Table 8

Number of School and School District Changes for Sample Students by Current Grade Placement

Current Grade Placement	Number of School Changes	Number of School Changes	Number of District Changes	Number of District Changes
	Mean	*Median*	*Mean*	*Median*
1	1.5	1.5	.5	.5
2	1.75	2.0	1.0	1.0
3	3.2	2.0	1.1	1.0
4	2.1	2.0	1.0	1.1
5	2.75	3.0	1.75	1.5
6	2.3	1.0	1.0	1.1
7	3.6	3.0	1.5	1.0
8	5.4	6.0	2.2	1.5
9	5.3	5.0	2.0	1.0
10	5.6	5.5	2.3	2.5
11	6.5	6.0	2.8	2.0
12	4.0	4.0	1.3	1.0
SU	5.0	4.0	2.8	3.0
Overall	3.2	4.0	1.95	1.0

The student sample is also characterized by a relatively high rate of grade retention. Although 65% of the samples have not been retained at any time during their school career, 18% of students have been retained at least one year. Approximately 17% have been retained 2, 3 or 4 years.

Of the 119 students in the sample identified in the Severe Behaviour Disorders category as of September 30, 2000, most were identified as being in behaviour programs in the prior school year. Almost 60% were identified in the Severe Behaviour Disorders category over both years. About 25% were reported in some other special education category in the prior year.

The distribution of 1999-2000 placements for the students identified in the 2000-2001 Severe Behaviour sample is shown in Table 9.

TABLE 9

Distribution of 1999-2000 Program Categories of for Students Identified September 30, 2000 in Severe Behaviour Disorders

1999-2000 Program	Number of Students	Percent of Sample
Severe Behaviour Disorders	69	58.0
Moderate Behaviour Disorders	15	12.6
Rehabilitation	5	4.2
Severe Learning Disabilities	9	7.6
Mild Intellectual Disabilities	1	0.8
Autism	1	0.8
Not in Special Education	12	10.1
Alternate Programs	5	4.2
Unknown	2	1.7
Overall	119	100.0

A significant number of students who are identified as having Severe Behaviour Disorders remain in that category over a number of school years.

Retrospective analysis of provincial-level data collected by the Ministry of Education indicates that 22% of Aboriginal students in Grades 8-10 who were reported as having Severe Behaviour Disorders in 1999-2000 school year were reported in that same category in the 1996-1997 school year. Similar levels of stability are reported for other grade ranges and for non-Aboriginal students.

Approximately 70% of students identified as having Severe Behaviour Disorders in 1999-2000 were reported in High Incidence Disability categories or not identified as having special educational needs in the 1996-1997 school year. The pattern is similar across grade ranges and for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. This suggests at least two possible scenarios:

(a) that the behaviour escalated over time, possibly related to academic frustration, or
(b) that the emotional/behavioural difficulties which were impacting student learning were not diagnosed in the first instance.

A prospective analysis of Primary to Junior Secondary students who were identified as having Severe Behaviour Disorders in the 1996-1997 school year shows that 35% - 45% of these students were identified in the 1999-2000 school years as having Severe Behaviour Disorders. Of those who were in Elementary and Junior Secondary grades, 25% - 45% were identified in other special education categories in the 1999-2000 school year. Approximately 75% of the male students had an initial referral by grade four.

REASONS FOR REFERRAL

The review of student files included an evaluation of the characteristic behaviours and concerns expressed when students were referred for identification as having Severe Behaviour Disorders.

Referral information in the files was drawn from teacher notes, school-based team meeting records, referral forms to student services, or (where available) case history summaries.

Reasons for referral were obtained for all 149 students in the sample. Although the most frequent reasons for referral predictably are for aggressive, acting out and oppositional behaviour, anecdotally, we observed that there are some regional differences.

Although the differences were not statistically significant, drug and alcohol abuse issues were more prominent among students in urban school districts.

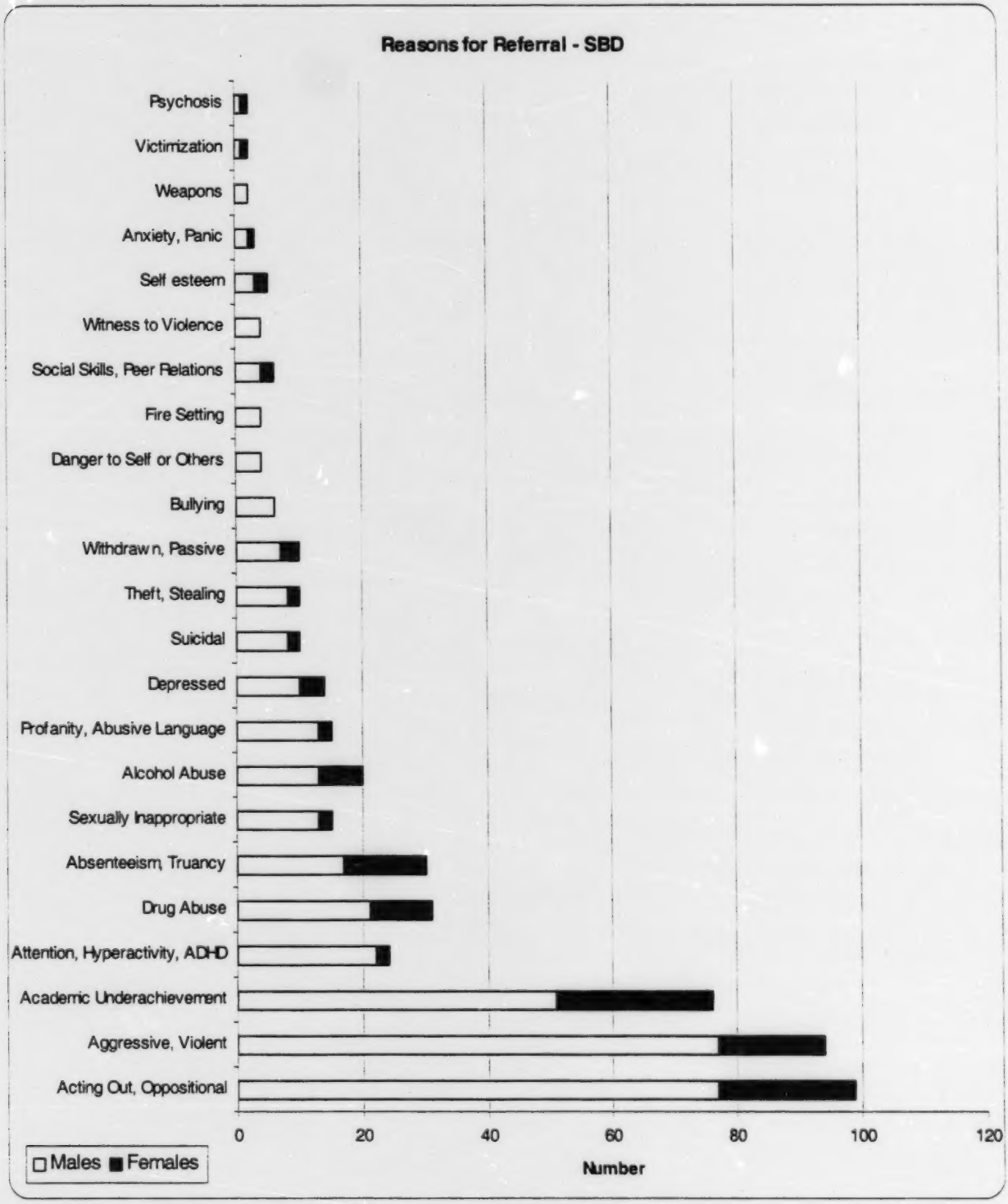
In only two instances were there actual diagnoses of psychosis on the record.

Often, more than one reason was given for referral and the descriptors are therefore not mutually exclusive. (For example, some acting out students were also described as having low self-esteem, and some students who used addictive substances were also depressed or acting out.) Many permutations and combinations were noted.

It appears that the predominant reasons why Aboriginal students, male or female, come to the attention of the school system and are seen to have behavioural difficulties are externalizing behaviours.

Figure 4 shows the major reasons related to the referrals and the number of students for whom the referral reasons were identified, by gender. Note that these reflect actual number of cases, and that there were more than twice as many males as females in the sample. Detail can be found in APPENDIX E, Table D.

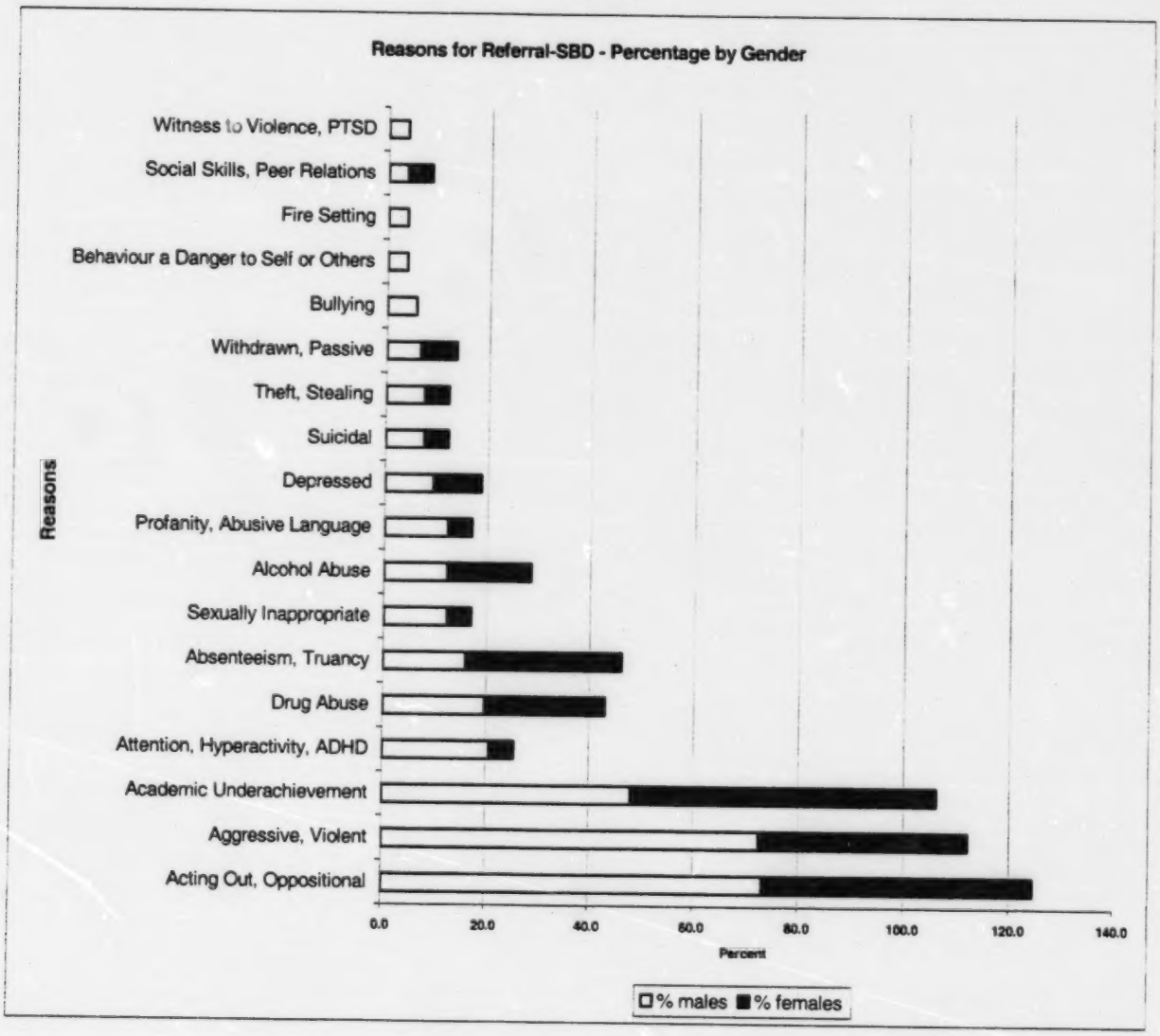
FIGURE 4


Reasons for Referral - SBD
Psychosis
Victimization
Weapons
Anxiety, Panic
Self esteem
Witness to Violence
Social Skills, Peer Relations
Fire Setting
Danger to Self or Others
Bullying
Withdrawn, Passive
Theft, Stealing
Suicidal
Depressed
Profanity, Abusive Language
Alcohol Abuse
Sexually Inappropriate
Absenteeism, Truancy
Drug Abuse
Attention, Hyperactivity, ADHD
Academic Underachievement
Aggressive, Violent
Acting Out, Oppositional
0
20
40
60
80
100
120
Males
Females
Number

Gender differences noted in the sample are highly consistent with patterns described in the literature, with females less likely to be referred for aggressive, violent, or acting out, oppositional behaviours. However, the difference for withdrawn, passive behaviours and depression were not consistent with the literature.

It should be noted that in many instances the gender differences are not as great when viewed as a percentage of the number of students of each gender, as shown in Figure 5, but that some behaviours appear to be more characteristic of males.

FIGURE 5



Where files included evidence of formal evaluation or prior diagnosis of FAS/FAE, or ADHD or identification of the student as a victim of sexual abuse, this was noted. Where the presence of any of these factors was noted but formal diagnostic documentation or identification information was not available, this was noted as such. Table 10 presents the distribution of these characteristics across the student sample.

TABLE 10

Number and percent of Student Sample Identified with FAS/FAE, ADHD, or as Victim of Sexual Abuse

Characteristic	FAS/FAE	ADHD	Sexual Abuse
Formal Identification	11 (7.4%)	21 (14.1%)	8 (5.4%)
Noted in File	11 (7.4%)	16 (10.8%)	5 (3.4%)
Total	22 (14.8%)	37 (24.9%)	13 (8.8%)

PRE-REFERRAL INTERVENTION

Each student file was reviewed for the presence of documents or information relating to the pre-referral process. The researchers sought to determine whether the file contained:

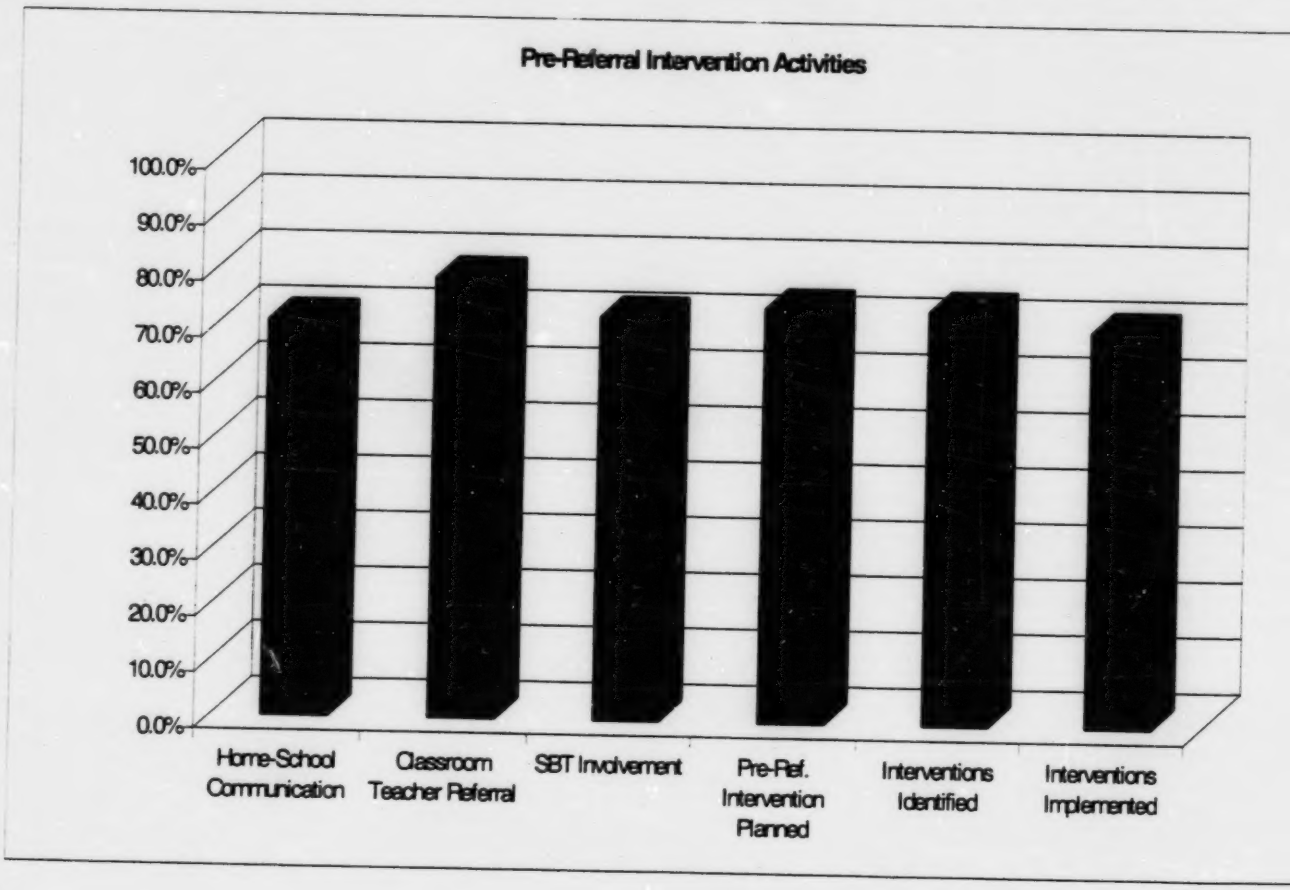
- formal school-home communication related to the students learning and behaviour needs (other than report cards)
- documentation of referral information from the classroom teacher,
- formal involvement of a school-based team prior to referral.
- evidence that pre-referral interventions had been planned.
- evidence that the interventions were clearly related to the stated referral problem
- evidence that the planned pre-referral interventions were implemented.

A summary of referral and pre-referral intervention evidence in student files across sample districts is shown in Figure 6. Detail by district is outlined in APPENDIX E, Table E.

These suggest that generally there was some communication to the home that occurred along with teacher referral, that in almost three-quarters of the cases, there was planning for intervention and that when this planning occurred, the interventions were generally related to the reasons why the student had been referred to the school-based team. In most cases, the records showed that the interventions had been implemented. In a small number of cases, the student left the school before the intervention could be implemented.

Districts showed substantial variation in practice around these pre-referral activities. Home school communication ranged from 41.4% to 95.2%. It is important to note that this does not necessarily mean that there was no communication with the home, but only that there was no record of it. Classroom teacher information in the files varied from 50% to 100% of files across districts, school-based team involvement from 45.5% to 90%, pre-referral intervention planning from 59% to 100%. Across districts, the relationship between the reason for referral and the intervention plan itself ranged from 54.6% to 100%. Implementation of intervention recorded in the student files varied from 54.6% to 100% across districts.

FIGURE 6



ASSESSMENT METHODS USED TO IDENTIFY STUDENTS WITH SBD

Each student file in the sample was reviewed for the presence of documents or information related to assessment of the student's academic abilities and achievement and the extent to which there was evidence that the student's behaviour problems had an adverse impact on the student's educational program.

Files were coded for the presence of results of norm-referenced or standardized measures of cognitive abilities, standardized measures of academic achievement, and criterion referenced or classroom assessments of reading, spelling, writing or mathematics achievement. A summary across sample districts of evidence related to impact of behaviour on academic program and information related to assessment of cognitive abilities and academic achievement is displayed in Table 11.

TABLE 11

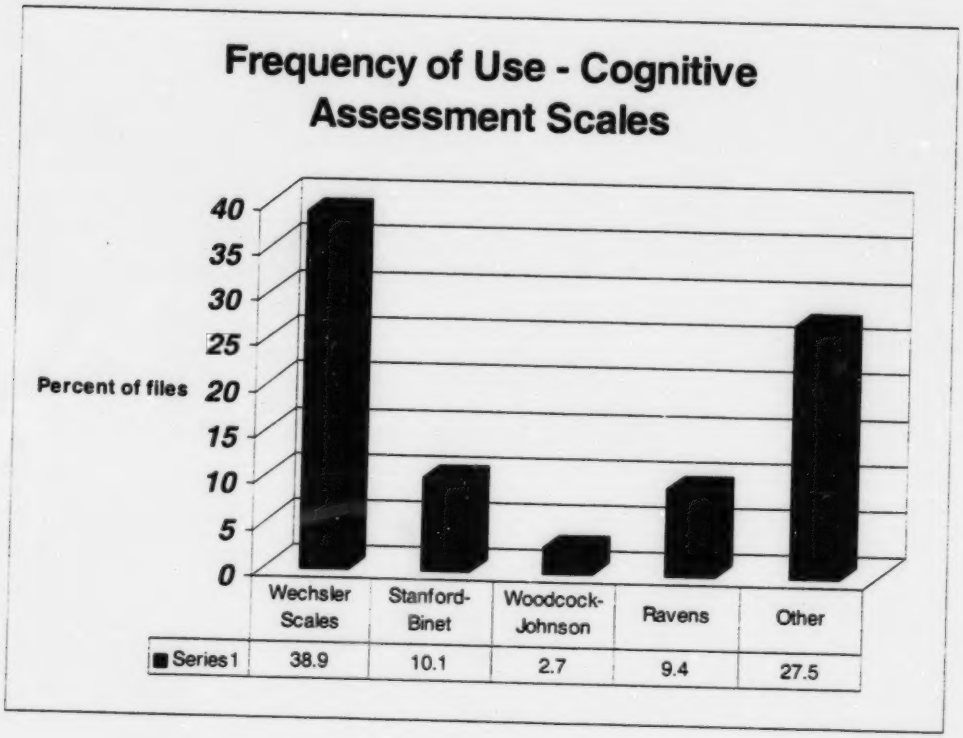
Percent of Student Files in Each Sample District which Include Evidence of Behaviour Impact and Assessment of Ability and Academic Achievement

District	*Impact of Behaviour on Education?*	***Standardized Assessment***		***Classroom or Criterion Referenced***			
		Cognitive Abilities	*Academic Achievement*	*Reading*	*Spelling*	*Writing*	*Math*
1	79.3	58.6	51.7	27.6	24.1	24.1	24.1
2	88.9	77.8	66.7	77.8	44.4	55.6	66.7
3	80.0	90.0	80.0	60.0	50.0	50.0	60.0
4	94.1	47.1	58.8	70.6	70.6	70.6	70.6
5	87.0	56.5	78.3	82.6	82.6	82.6	82.6
6	94.4	33.3	72.2	72.2	50.0	55.6	61.1
7	81.0	33.3	57.1	57.1	57.1	57.1	57.1
8	72.7	63.6	72.7	31.8	33.3	31.8	40.9
Overall	83.9	54.4	65.8	56.4	50.7	51.7	55.0

Note that student files sometimes included evidence of administration of one or more than one standardized assessment of intellectual or cognitive abilities. Regardless of which assessment instrument was used, interpretations tended to be very cautious, and reports contained caveats relative to cross-cultural factors. Often only the Performance section of the Wechsler scales were reported. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) was frequently used as an "other" scale, but almost invariably were used not as a test of cognitive functioning but to obtain a measure of English vocabulary.

Figure 7 shows the relative frequency of use of various cognitive assessment scales.

FIGURE 7

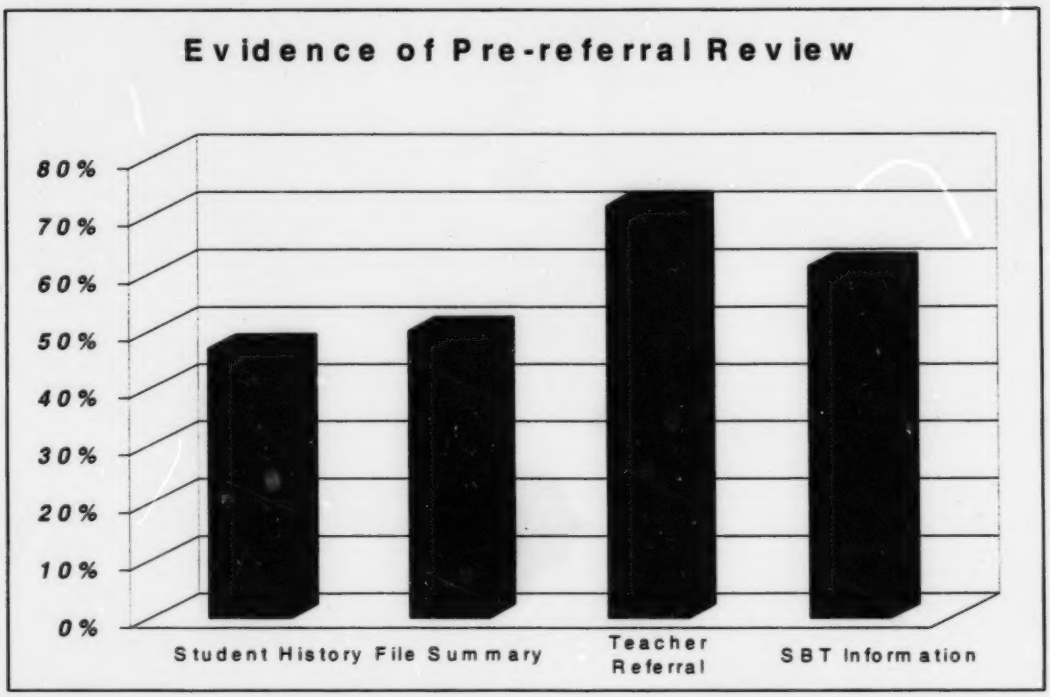


Files were reviewed for the presence specific documents or information related to the history of the student's problem behaviour and activities used in the pre-referral assessment of the student's behavioural problems. This included:

- whether the file included a case history or summary of the students background
- whether there was a formal file review or review of the student's history of services received over time
- evidence of classroom teacher referral information
- evidence of school-based team or pre-referral intervention information related to behaviour

The evidence related to the presence of this type of information is shown in Figure 8 on the following page, and summarized by district and in total in APPENDIX E – Table F.

FIGURE 8



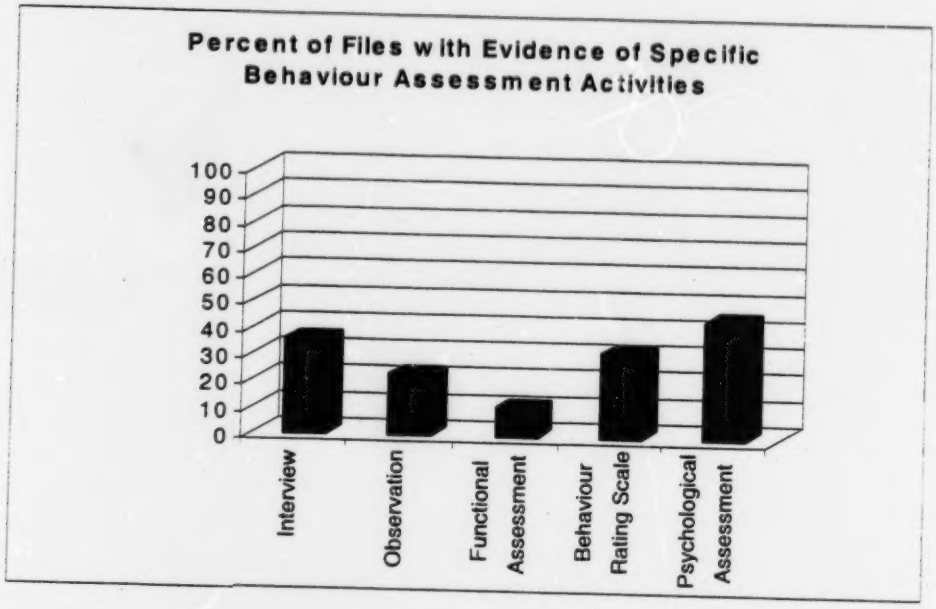
It appeared that the process of reviewing the file or the student's history to gain a better understanding of how the student got to the current situation was the exception rather than the rule in most districts. In some cases there was no evidence of teacher referral or analysis of classroom behaviour. What was generally true in those cases was that a precipitating event caused administrative action that eventually led to placement. This was particularly true for secondary students.

There were substantial differences across districts. Evidence of school-based team planning ranged from 52.4% to 100% of files in different districts.

Files were also reviewed for the presence of specific assessment information specifically related to behaviour, including the use of interviews, observations, functional assessments, the use of specific behaviour rating scales or inventories as part of the identification process, and whether files included psychological assessments. This information is contained in Figure 9.

A summary of specific assessment-related evidence in student files across sample districts is presented in Table G in APPENDIX E.

FIGURE 9



As Figure 9 suggests, the level of specific assessment of behaviour is not extensive, particularly considering that the primary reason for reporting the student in this category is the severity of the behaviour.

INDIVIDUAL EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

Four major areas were reviewed:

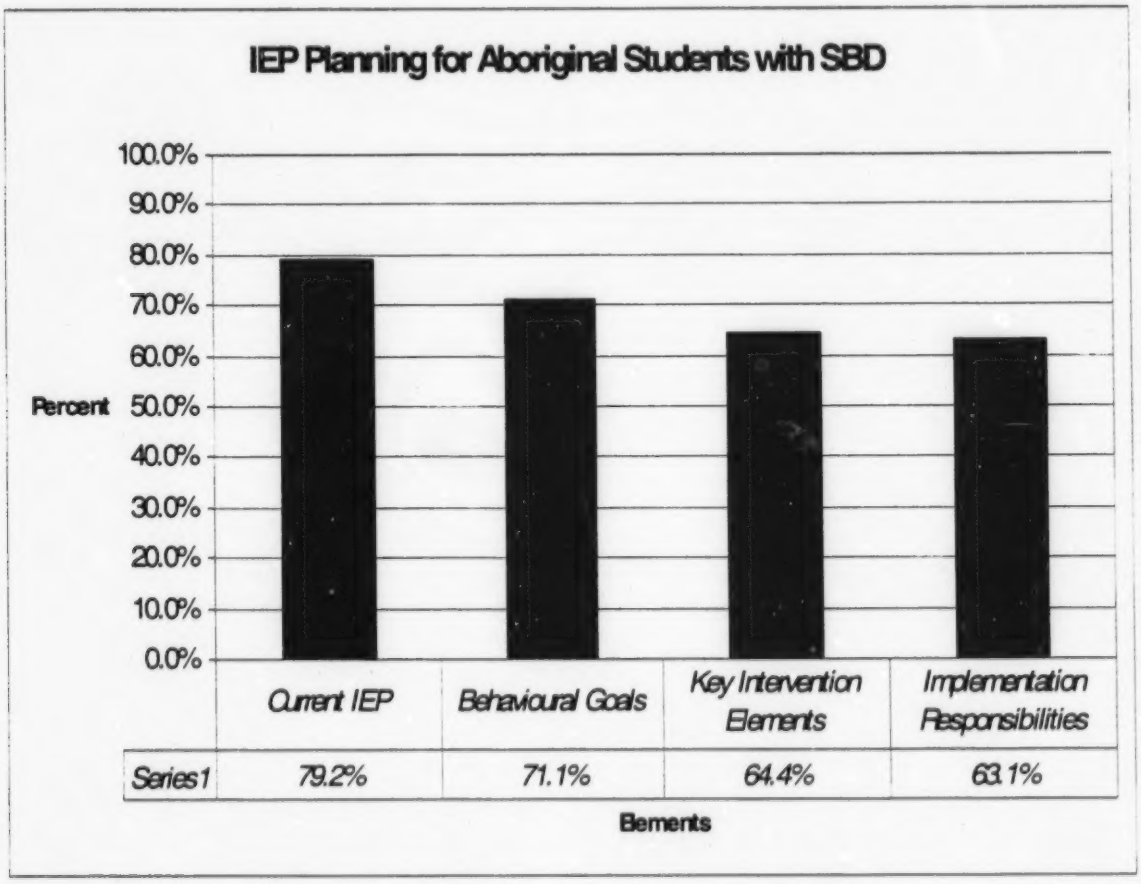
- currency and content of the IEP
- management of the IEP process (planning, implementation, review & evaluation)
- parent involvement
- multi-agency involvement

Program planning and implementation were reviewed in each of the student files to determine:

- whether the student file contained evidence of a current Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
- the extent to which key characteristics of the IEP were present
- whether there was evidence of planning for the student's academic and behaviour program
- whether there was evidence that the planned programs were implemented and
- whether the program was reviewed and effects of the program evaluated.

Results of the review of student files in each of the sample school districts for evidence of these components are shown in Figure 10. Detail by district is presented in Table I, APPENDIX E.

FIGURE 10



There are statistically significant differences among school districts in the percent of students who have current IEPs and in the percent of student files that contain specific IEP elements.

Detailed results of the review of student files in each of the sample school districts for evidence of planning for the student's academic and behaviour program are presented in Table I, APPENDIX E. Included in this table are percentages of student files that contained evidence that a current IEP was in place, that the IEP contained behavioural goals, whether the key intervention elements were identified, and whether responsibilities for implementation were identified in the plan.

TABLE 12

Percent of Student Files in Each Sample District which Include Evidence of Specific Elements of Program Planning, Implementation, Review and Evaluation

District	Academic Planning	Behaviour Planning	Program Implementation	Program Review	Program Evaluation
1	55.2	58.6	48.3	37.9	10.3
2	55.6	55.6	33.3	55.6	0.0
3	60.0	80.0	80.0	70.0	60.0
4	76.5	64.7	64.7	82.4	58.8
5	95.7	95.7	82.6	87.0	60.9
6	83.3	83.3	88.9	83.3	55.6
7	85.7	71.4	71.4	76.2	42.9
8	72.7	81.8	77.3	72.7	50.0
Overall	74.5	74.5	69.1	69.8	42.3

Note that in this area of program planning and implementation there were statistically significant differences among school districts on all areas, with the exception of evidence of program planning to address behaviour, where differences among districts in the percent of students were not significant.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

The third area was related to the involvement of parents at the pre-referral stage and subsequently, in assessment, and in planning of IEP goals and planning program implementation.

Results are presented in Table 13. Included in this table are percentages of student files that contained evidence that parents participated in pre-referral activities, and where parents were involved in the planning of assessment, development of IEP goals, and plans for implementation of the IEP plan.

TABLE 13

Percent of Student Files in Each Sample District which Include Evidence of Parent Involvement in Pre-Referral, Assessment and IEP Planning Activities

District	Pre-Referral Involvement	Assessment Planning	IEP Goal Planning	IEP Implementation Planning
1	31.0	10.3	17.2	0.3
2	66.7	33.3	22.2	11.1
3	50.0	0.0	50.0	40.0
4	35.3	0.0	35.3	35.3
5	87.0	21.7	82.6	65.2
6	61.1	0.6	66.7	33.3
7	42.9	0.5	61.9	14.3
8	31.8	0.5	40.9	0.5
Overall	49.0	0.9	47.7	24.8

In the area of parent involvement there were statistically significant differences among school districts in all areas. Only eight of the 149 files (5%) contained evidence of parental involvement in all of the identified aspects, while 57 files (38%) showed no evidence of parent involvement in any of the identified areas. A further 57 files contained evidence of parental involvement in at least one or two aspects of the pre-referral, assessment, and IEP planning process.

COMMUNITY AND INTER-AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

The fourth area was related to evidence of multi-agency involvement in planning and implementation of the student's educational program as identified on the IEP and whether a case manager was identified.

Results of the review of student files in each of the sample school districts for evidence that students were known to, receiving services from, or in programs supported by other agencies are presented in Table 14.

Included in this table are percentages of student files that contained evidence of some level of agency involvement from Bands, Special Aboriginal Service Agencies, Ministry of Children and Families, Probation or other services of the Ministry of the Attorney General. The table also includes the percentage of files in each district that contained evidence of involvement of at least one other agency besides the school in some aspect of the student's life.

TABLE 14

Percent of Student Files in Each Sample District which Include Evidence of Agency Awareness, Service Provision, or Support for Student Programs

District	Band Involvement	Aboriginal Service Agency	Ministry of Children and Families	Mental Health	Police/ Probation	At Least One Agency
1	0.0	20.7	51.7	10.3	10.3	62.1
2	22.2	44.4	77.8	55.6	11.1	100.0
3	10.0	0.0	60.0	30.0	0.0	70.0
4	0.0	41.2	64.7	23.5	23.5	76.5
5	0.4	60.9	78.3	21.7	21.7	100.0
6	0.0	61.1	44.4	27.8	16.7	83.3
7	0.0	1.0	43.0	14.3	14.3	66.7
8	13.6	0.5	27.3	0.5	0.5	40.9
Overall	0.5	30.2	53.7	19.5	13.4	72.5

There were significant differences among school district percentages in all areas of inter-agency involvement with the exception of police/probation.

Note that the Ministry of Education guidelines require the involvement of at least one other agency as a condition of eligibility in the Severe Behaviour Disorders category.

The "No-longer-in-program" group

The thirty cases of students who had been reported as Severe Behaviour Disorders in the prior year but were now not thus reported did not differ in any statistically significant way from the current in-program group on any of the dimensions when the two groups were compared.

Table 15 on the following page shows the reported status of these students as of September 30, 2000. It will be noted that in many instances, further diagnostic information resulted in a change in the category in which the student was reported.

TABLE 15

Current Status of Students no Longer Reported as SBD as of September 30/2000

Current Status	Number	Percent
Diagnosed with autism	1	3.3%
Out of school – in community program	2	6.7%
Left School – not graduated	2	6.7%
Full time in regular class	2	6.7%
Reported as Severe LD	5	16.7%
Reported as Moderate BD/Rehab	16	52.3%
Mild Intellectual Disabilities	2	6.7%
Total	30	100%

In some cases, students were removed from the SBD category not because they had achieved the goals in their individual program, but because the criterion of involvement of another agency or Ministry could no longer be met.

This implies either that services were deployed elsewhere where there was greater need, or that the other agency perceived that progress had been made and the intervention was no longer required. It was unclear from the files as to the reasons.

Unfortunately, therefore, our examination of "successful" cases yielded nothing substantive by way of successful practice.

QUALITATIVE DATA IN STUDENT FILES

Qualitative information in the files was as revealing as quantitative data. It is not possible to capture the scope of these students' stories in statistical terms. Many of the files contained extensive material from a variety of sources over time. A large percentage of the students were identified as troubled from the beginning, and many started school from behind, not having met the developmental milestones that are generally correlated with success in school. They often did not have the social skills to establish positive relationships with either adults or peers. Their self-esteem suffered, and things got progressively worse over time.

The general picture that emerged was that of a cohort of students many of whose lives could only be described as chaotic. Poverty was often an element in their histories. Their education appeared to be frequently disrupted and their home lives often unstable. Many had a series of guardians over time, sometimes family members and sometimes foster parents. Several not in care at the current time had histories of being in care at some point.

Some students had experienced the suicide of a close family member. Others had witnessed various forms of violence in their homes. Some had been victims of abuse themselves.

Evidence from empirical research indicates that students with three or more risk factors are at risk of developing behavioural difficulties. Overall, the number of risk factors for many of these children was such that the development of behavioural problems was predictable almost from the outset.

Typically, the most difficult histories to review were those which started with report card comments in Kindergarten or Grade 1 of a child described as a delight in the classroom, although distractible and hyper-active, who enjoyed singing and art and displayed an enthusiasm for learning. Consistent with the literature, these students appeared to be at greater risk for longer term problems in school. (Gresham, Lane & Lambros, 200; Lynam, 1996). Most of them followed patterns identified in the literature from less to more severe behaviour problems (Farrington, Loeber & Van Krammer, 1990, Hinshaw, Lahey & Hart, 1993, Loever, 1982, Moffit, 1990). This was reflected in teacher comments over time about difficulty with reading and writing, inattention, disruptive behaviour, and ultimately aggression and more serious behaviours.

Also striking were the many instances in which, despite their risk factors, many of these students managed to maintain some level of functioning in elementary school, but encountered difficulties on entry to secondary school. Efforts by some school boards to address these transition issues as a strategy to support Aboriginal students are validated by these histories.

We noted that in many instances, teachers did not appear to be aware of the circumstances in which many of their students live, and the emotional needs of these students for security, stability, nurturing, and a sense of acceptance as pre-cursors to academic learning.

We also noted that there were some teachers who went out of their way to ensure that the child's needs were met in their classrooms, to ensure these needs were understood as they moved from one classroom or school to another, to make personal connections with their students, who reached out to the Aboriginal community to establish meaningful collaborative partnerships and sometimes made efforts to keep in touch with the student over time.

WHAT THE DISTRICT REPRESENTATIVES SAID

Interviews were structured from the more general (approaches to educating Aboriginal students, approaches to dealing with behavioural issues, generic services available in the community) to the more specific (addressing specific issues arising in the education of Aboriginal students, strategies for dealing with difficult behaviours). Opinions about what strategies appear to be more or less effective were sought, and later questions were geared to information that might be useful to educators or to Aboriginal parents.

GENERAL APPROACHES TO MEETING NEEDS OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

Although the needs and goals for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students were seen as generally similar, (such as the need for early literacy programs) all districts identified that the strategies required are different for Aboriginal students than for other populations in the district.

Districts identified varied ways of applying targeted funding to support these efforts. These ranged from funds applied only to support First Nations students to those which recognized schools with high enrolments of Aboriginal students by increasing resource teacher levels in the school.

The central role of an active Aboriginal Advisory Committee/Council in planning and budgeting and influencing decision-making by the Board was identified as a common approach. The role of committee varied considerably by district - some have general advisory functions, while others are actively involved in priority setting and decision-making on allocation of targeted funds. Sometimes there was a central advisory council and several task-specific committees. One district mentioned a performance contract with the Ministry and local bands.

Accommodations varied across districts and in some cases between schools in the same district, and included wide range of approaches such as:

- Employment of First Nations Support Workers
- Exemptions, with bargaining unit and Human Rights Commission agreement, to preferential hiring of personnel of Aboriginal origin.
- Linkages with the NITEP program to encourage Aboriginal teachers-in-training to come to the district.
- Aboriginal programs/curriculum adaptations .
- Incentive programs to recognize student attendance and achievement.
- An Aboriginal Life skills program for students at risk
- A First Nations counselling centre and Child Care program available in a large secondary school on a drop-in basis
- Tutoring programs after school.
- Support for Aboriginal Youth Leadership activities
- Identifying a place in the school which can support a sense of place and belonging. (an "Aboriginal Centre or Room" in the school, a place where students can feel welcome, which recognizes their cultural heritage, provides a supportive environment, and creates access to an informal support network.)
- Developing a collection of Aboriginal learning and teaching resources.
- Full-day Kindergarten programs with an emphasis on early intervention

- First Nations skill development programs with extra academic support at elementary
- With agreement of FN community, target literacy development, and purchase of literacy software to support literacy program in schools.
- First Nations art and culture recognized in school design and displays (e.g. totems, blankets, art displays, etc.)
- Offering Aboriginal language programs as credit courses at Secondary.
- Intensive orientation and strengthening of transition efforts for Aboriginal student moving from elementary to secondary schools.
- Incorporation of culturally based materials integrated with generic materials across the curriculum – examples such as Aboriginal art, local cultural history, and the involvement of local artists and storytellers were given.
- Incorporation of Aboriginal cultural activities for all students at certain grade levels.
- Culturally-based activities in schools for Aboriginal kids to experience their own culture
- Summer cultural camp in association with other community groups
- Parenting programs in the community offered by school district personnel.
- Community schools with preschool and coordination of early intervention with school programs at entry. Use of supported child care in developing early interventions and bridge support to primary instruction and planning
- Active recruitment of First Nations parent involvement in Parent Advisory Council (PAC) – with an Aboriginal staff person specifically assigned to support parent involvement in the PAC.
- Aboriginal Education Coordinator and teachers meet regularly with the Aboriginal community -in the community rather than on school district premises.
- Adult education programs on reserve with funding for adults through local education agreement

In some cases, ESL teachers were also deployed to teach English as a second dialect to Aboriginal students whose language skills in English appeared to be a barrier to early literacy or to participation in the classroom.

Some districts were reviewing their policy provisions with a view to improving the success of Aboriginal students. Others had examined their administrative structure with responsibilities for Aboriginal programs placed at a more senior level in the organization.

In general, the approaches were primarily aimed at improving self-esteem and respect and prevention of academic and behavioural difficulties, with some programs specifically targeted toward higher-risk Aboriginal students or those already in difficulty.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT THAT AFFECT SERVICES

Personnel in several school districts described the diversity of their Aboriginal communities as a challenge to providing services. In districts with a higher population of students affiliated with Nations and bands the routes to establishing working relationships were seen as more direct.

Urban Aboriginal populations and Metis often do not have links to band or local Aboriginal or Metis community. In urban communities, personnel described the need to develop Aboriginal school community

as a base for support since there may not be such support in the community. Friendship centres appeared to vary in their ability to fulfill this function.

In some cases, students did and parents did not identify with or declare their affiliation with FN or Metis ancestry. School boards did not always know who the Aboriginal students are. Most reported that their rates are increasing, and some attributed this to improved programming for Aboriginal students.

Some of the administrative challenges in serving a diverse Aboriginal population cited were:

- The needs to hire individuals who can work across and be accepted by various groups. Staffing needs to take this into account.
- Programming needs to take into account the multiple and specific linguistic and cultural groups, both in terms of what the curriculum includes and in staffing. For urban communities this needs to be very inclusive; for some communities this may mean reflection of local culture and language

ROLE OF FIRST NATIONS SUPPORT WORKERS

Assignment

All districts interviewed employed workers, sometimes with different job titles, as First Nations Support Workers. In some districts, in schools with substantial numbers of Aboriginal students, the worker was attached to a single school. In others they served several schools on an itinerant basis. In some configurations, the service area was one secondary school and the elementary feeder schools. This configuration was seen to have the advantage of assisting the students with transition from elementary to secondary schools.

Functions

The functions performed by First Nations Support Workers varied by community. Examples included:

- Providing both academic and social-emotional support to the student as well as some family support. There was seen to be a delicate balance between the jurisdiction of school, family and community.
- Acting as a liaison between the school and the family.
- Developing academic supports to supplement school and home (e.g., home work clubs, tutoring programs) in conjunction with the Aboriginal community.
- Identifying resource personnel in the Aboriginal community to support the Aboriginal Education program in the school or district. One example was implementation of a Healing Circle for vulnerable students.

Academic support was seen as clearly the role of schools while behaviour support in some instances was seen as a somewhat politicized area. Sometimes, there were questions about whether there was cultural acceptance on the part of the Aboriginal community of school involvement in the social-emotional functioning of Aboriginal students.

Generally, it appeared easier to gather around a child who is struggling academically but more difficult to gain support for student who is struggling with social-emotional issues.

A related issue for districts was the question of training of the First Nations Support Worker. This appeared to influence their status in the school-based team.

Effective Utilization

School districts with a lower proportion of Aboriginal students reported as having behaviour disorders tended to place a somewhat different emphasis on the role of the Aboriginal support worker. They tended to:

- Encourage the Aboriginal Support Worker to act in a pro-active manner in contacting families early in the school year to inform them of their services and to encourage communication with themselves and the school, as opposed to waiting until problems arose.
- Systematically include the Support Worker as a member of the school-based problem-solving team in cases where an Aboriginal student was on the agenda.
- Utilize the support worker to encourage direct family involvement rather than act simply as a messenger between home and school.
- Focus on success in academic learning and skill development as an important component of the work with the Aboriginal learner.
- Identify the responsibilities for the Support Worker in implementing the Individual Education Plan (IEP) when a student was in a special education program.
- Require the Aboriginal Support worker to keep contact notes accessible in the student file when a school-based team was involved.

DIFFERENCES FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS FROM OTHER CULTURAL GROUPS

Most districts began with the premise that services available to students are generic and geared to whoever needs them. They also acknowledged that there were some needs that Aboriginal students had that could not be met by generic programs and that required specialized services delivered by culturally competent people.

Early literacy programs for ESL and other populations were described as similar to those for FN students, particularly as they relate to language development needs. However, the emphasis was generally described as different.

Most felt that standards of behaviour and codes of conduct needed to be the same for everyone, although the way in which they are applied needed to take into account the culture of the student.

IDENTIFICATION OF STUDENTS WITH BEHAVIOURAL DIFFICULTIES

In general, the identification of student need was described as following a pattern of initial identification by the teacher, referral to a school-based team, and subsequent referral to services beyond the school where the school did not appear to have the expertise or resources to address the behavioural issues themselves.

This pattern sometimes deviated when another agency brought the needs to the student to the attention of the school district or the school upon registration.

This was described as a generic approach, not unique to Aboriginal students.

WORKING WITH COMMUNITY RESOURCES

District personnel felt that in general, resources to support students with behavioural difficulties were lacking in their communities and that those resources that were available were deployed for crisis intervention. They observed that requests for support from service providers were often ignored when schools first identified students at risk or in the early stages of developing emotional and behavioural problems.

The Ministry for Children and Families was sometimes seen as particularly non-responsive but these comments were often qualified. School district personnel saw individual social workers as trying their best but burdened by large caseloads, frequent staff vacancies and turnovers, and in some cases with mandates that resulted in a focus on crisis intervention rather than prevention and early intervention. They believed that information sharing was often inhibited by perceived limitations of Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy provisions, and differences in perception about "need to know". These factors taken together were seen to inhibit meaningful cross-agency collaborative approaches.

Districts identified that they work in co-operation with Aboriginal cultural societies, Friendship Centres, and Band Education Coordinators across a range if activities. These agencies varied substantially in the services they offer from one community to another, and these differences were reflected in the responses.

One district described the Friendship Centre in the community as particularly effective, offering a range of services, with ready access and open communication with the district. (This was also reflected in the case files of the students in that community, where cross-agency collaboration was clearly evident in the behavioural plans for many Aboriginal students with severe behavioural difficulties.)

Another saw the Band Education Coordinator as being an articulate spokesperson who advocated within the Band for parenting programs for young parents and was effective in working with the community to develop an early childhood education program on the Reserve.

DISTRICT PERSPECTIVES ON BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

Staff Training and Awareness

Most administrators acknowledged the need to do more in the area of training for school staff. Some expressed the view that there seemed to be little interest in professional development related to First Nations beyond those teachers who were already directly involved, despite the fact that opportunities had been provided. They saw competition for time in the face of multiple staff development needs as a barrier, as well as teacher interest. Compulsory in-service in this area, in the face of teacher priorities and competing in-service demands, was not seen as a viable option without substantial resources for release during instructional time.

First Nations Support Workers were seen as bringing important understandings of Aboriginal cultures into the system. However, in several districts, a need was identified for systematic upgrading of these personnel to improve their ability to support remedial instruction and to increase support skills in both academic instruction and behaviour management.

Establishing Working Relationships

Districts acknowledged difficulties in establishing trust relationships. Most described their relationships with the Aboriginal community as being "quite good" to "very good", but even those most confident described a long process of trust-building over a period of years. There was recognition that it was difficult to deal with sensitive issues around behavioural disorders without these relationships being firmly established.

They described the use of targeted funds as a particularly sensitive point for the Aboriginal community, and districts described the various consultative structures they had put in place to make the spending of these funds more transparent.

Other identified issues around the building of working relationships between school and Aboriginal community included:

- Historical issues regarding schools and residential schools and related mistrust of institutions
- Difficulty in establishing relationship between school and administrators with parents who feel dis-empowered, fear authority, feeling they lack right to challenge and have expectations for their children.
- Shame, guilt blame associated with FAS/FAE and related conditions among their children.

Some districts identified the concern among Aboriginal communities that designating a student as having special needs might lead to increased segregation, decreased opportunities, "watered down" curriculum, or lower expectations for their children.

EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

Generally, school boards do not collect data on the effect of their program interventions for Aboriginal students. Several commented that they found the Ministry of Education data with regard to their own districts helpful in tracking, an in generating discussion about program effectiveness. Most, however, do not have data systems which track the impact of their interventions in any specific way. Some saw limitations in access to technology as problematic in this regard. Others identified the need to reduce "administrativia" and paper-work in the face of limited resources as a barrier to improving information systems.

School boards appear to rely heavily on feedback from their staff and their communities as barometers of effectiveness, but there is little evidence of systematic efforts to develop agreement about indicators of effectiveness or to track these.

With one exception, districts reported that they do not track suspension information, despite the relationship between behavioural issues and school suspension. District administrators felt that this information would be available at individual schools, but it was not generally aggregated at the district level.

Some schools have begun to implement Effective Behaviour Support (EBS) programs, to use functional behavioural assessment and to develop baseline information with regard to behaviour. These tend to be site-based and therefore vary substantially from school to school.

WHY IS THERE OVER-REPRESENTATION OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS IN SBD?

Responses across districts were highly consistent. Most common responses included:

- Poverty/SES
- Family dysfunction – tied to residential school history and lack of parenting skills
- Parents with low literacy and numeracy skills
- Lack of language models in the home
- Higher level of exposure to drug and alcohol use
- Witnessing of violence
- Lack of role models
- Cultural bias in schools
- Higher prevalence of FAS/FAE and all that goes with it
- Transiency/mobility rates higher than average (especially in urban areas).
- Lower expectations/low self-esteem

WHAT DISTRICT PERSONNEL WOULD LIKE TO CHANGE

- Earlier intervention/improve school readiness
- Increased interaction between Aboriginal parents and the school
- Sustained support for Aboriginal families
- Reduced transience/mobility
- More appreciation in schools of individual differences – for all students
- Improve outreach and wrap-around services – more comprehensive
- Strengthen the capacity of First Nations communities
- Aboriginal communities taking a more active role in /around issues that affect them
- Changes in the structure of secondary schools – particularly around the middle school years
- Break the cycle of intergenerational abuse
- Eliminate racism

WHAT THE ABORIGINAL FOCUS GROUPS SAID

The eight focus groups together represented a substantial body of collective knowledge and understanding from a community perspective. As with any community, there were differences of opinion, not only between groups but also within groups.

The summary below is not intended to be a comprehensive listing of all of the things that were said and the many points made, but rather a synthesis of the common themes that emerged from the eight groups.

WAYS OF WORKING TOGETHER

Focus group opinions about the school and district were qualitatively different in school districts with lower drop-out, higher school completion rates, and lower prevalence of behaviour disorders among Aboriginal students.

Community Consultation Processes

Several focus groups described the development of the working relationship with the district as a long journey - in some cases a struggle - over some years. While most of the districts had some type of consultative structure involving Aboriginal groups, generally including both Bands, local Friendship Centre representatives and Metis groups, there was a qualitative difference in the way that these groups were seen to function.

Characteristics identified as effective included open communication, transparency in the decision-making process, and meaningful involvement in priority setting for targeted Provincial funding for Aboriginal programs.

Resource Sharing

Effective partnerships included in some instances cost-sharing or in-kind contributions between the band and the school district to address particular problems among Aboriginal youth. In some cases, there were agreements to fund personnel who, while employed by one agency or the other, were designed as a cadre to work together. In other instances, the Band made efforts to make community members available on an volunteer basis to assist in cultural programs in the school, or to arrange visits for all students at particular grade levels to longhouses or significant sites.

BARRIERS TO WORKING TOGETHER

Level of Trust

Aboriginal advisory groups were seen as least effective when the level of trust was low, when the consultation process was seen as token rather than open dialogue, and/or when it was dominated by school district personnel.

The responsibilities of Aboriginal representatives to communicate the activities of the Aboriginal advisory group sometimes came to the fore. Some members of the focus group did not realize that such an advisory structure existed, or what was being discussed, and were pleasantly surprised to know that this mechanism was in place in the district. However, it was clear that the information had not reached them through the community communication system.

Contractual Barriers

One group described a collaborative effort that had been derailed because of a collective agreement. There had been in place an agreement between the district and the band, each of which funded a counselor to support Aboriginal youth. Because the Band-funded counselor worked in the school, a union issue arose. The Band suggested that they might provide the funding to the district to support the position, but the individual in the position, judged to be effective by the Band, could not be guaranteed the position with the district because of seniority provisions. The agreement was therefore discontinued.

Some groups mentioned the provisions of collective agreements as creating barriers to the employment of Aboriginal people in the education system. Because they believed that positive role models in schools were important in shaping the self-esteem and behaviour of students, this was seen as one element that contributes to negative behaviours.

Certification Requirements

Some groups described the certification requirements for teachers as being a barrier to the effective recruitment of Aboriginal people to work in schools. They believed that people qualified to teach Aboriginal language and culture should not be expected to do so on a voluntary basis, but should become part of the teaching staff of the district. However, the certification requirements for these people were mentioned as a barrier to full utilization of Aboriginal people as role models in school settings in two districts.

Euro-centricity of the Education Workforce

Most groups perceived a cultural divide between a largely Euro-centric workforce in the education system and the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people. They believe that such a lack of understanding contributes in no small measure to the adjustment problems faced by many Aboriginal students in school. Cultural differences in ways of showing respect and of problem-solving were mentioned as examples.

Fear of Losing their Children

This is perhaps the most powerful barrier described by the focus groups. We heard many instances of parents who were afraid to supply information to the school or to discuss their children's behavioural difficulties for fear that it would be seen in a different light by the school and perhaps reported to the Ministry for Children and Families as potential abuse or neglect. This is particularly problematic when there is empirical evidence that appropriate inter-agency collaborative effort is an effective strategy in addressing emotional and behavioural problems in children and youth. For Aboriginal families, particularly urban single-parent Aboriginal families who are already reliant on the Ministry for support, this represented an intimidating scenario.

RURAL-URBAN DIFFERENCES

Some behavioural issues were described which appeared related to geography. In rural areas, long bus rides from more remote Aboriginal communities to centralized schools (particularly secondary schools) created increased opportunities for problem behaviour on busses and problems with tired children more likely to be cranky, out-of-sorts, and vulnerable to inappropriate responses and behaviour.

Special problems arise when the students must board away from home in more urban, unfamiliar, non-Aboriginal environments, away from their families and the controls in their own communities. We heard multiple examples of adjustment problems and supervision issues arising from this set of circumstances.

In some instances, the Aboriginal communities were not convinced that the closure of schools closer to their communities was an appropriate solution or that there had been any educational benefit to their children from larger schools with more academic options.

ROLE OF FIRST NATIONS SUPPORT WORKERS

There was a high level of support for the employment of First Nations Support Workers across focus groups. While there were some comments about ineffective practices, the vast majority of participants saw important roles for First Nations support staff in promoting Aboriginal culture in the school program, performing liaison functions between school and home, and serving as role models for Aboriginal students in the school – all functions which they believed were inherently designed to prevent and address behaviour problems.

Several groups felt that there were too few workers to perform the job and that in some cases students and parents did not know the worker was someone they could turn to in the school if they were having difficulty.

Others saw an important role for support workers as mentors, both for students and in the role of a supportive advocate for parents.

SCHOOL AS AN INSTITUTION

Virtually every focus group expressed the notion that for Aboriginal people, schools tend to be intimidating places. They attribute much of this to direct or indirect experiences in residential schools and the attendant fear of the authority that school represents.

Some people described their own reactions to coming to the school – not being able to work up the courage to go through the door, trembling, anxiety attacks, or being unable to speak, or not feeling they have the right to ask questions, to speak up or to advocate for their children.

Focus groups told us that many of to-days schools continue to appear to them as unwelcoming places where there is little understanding of their fear, and where institutionalized racism continues to exist among both staff and students.

Some disturbing allegations of racist comments by teachers or perceived differences in treatment of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students for similar behaviours were not infrequent.

Along with criticisms, we also heard positive examples of ways in which some schools are working to eliminate racism.

Parent Advisory Councils (PACS): were problematic for many Aboriginal parents. They were unable to see these councils as structures where they could participate meaningfully.

In one community, there was disagreement because Aboriginal parents wanted a PAC of their own, where they might feel more comfortable in coming together. However, the view of the PAC in the school was that there was provision for only one PAC for a school and that they should join this group. Aboriginal people had no difficulty in principle with a single PAC but felt marginalized in their attempts to participate.

In another community, the school district attempted to encourage Aboriginal parent involvement by holding parent meetings with personnel responsible for Aboriginal education programs in the district, to discuss issues and to share information. Attendance was reported as not high, but those that did attend said they felt better connected with the school district as a result.

In still another community, one woman, a professional who was already an active volunteer in the school, described the PAC as putting on a fund-raising activity for which she volunteered. She observed that all of the other volunteers were given responsibilities for handling funds except for her. She wondered if people felt she was not capable of such a task.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Many groups commented on the extent to which the school's response to behavioural difficulties is driven by the principal in the school and several described dramatic shifts that occurred (either positively or negatively) when there was a change in administrative leadership.

Some examples which received praise from the focus groups included:

- A situation in which a prior principal operated a school relatively closed to the Aboriginal community where suspension and drop-out rates were high. A new principal coming to the school recognized it as a problem for which he had no obvious solutions, and approached the Aboriginal Community and the Friendship Centre for information and advice. Their collaborative efforts resulted in a less punitive, more problem-solving approach to the problem and evidence that the school culture was changing as a result.

- One urban elementary school with a high percentage of Aboriginal students, most of whom were not affiliated with a band, decided to create its own "Aboriginal community". The principal initiated morning coffee groups and used the Fist Nations Support Worker to encourage parents to attend. The agenda was to help Aboriginal parents to get to know one another, to familiarize them with the school, and to encourage their involvement in the school program. These efforts were reflected in comments from the focus group in that district such as "I volunteer at the school and I am quite proud of what the school is doing" and "_____ is an incredible school".

- Another described the relationship around opening a new school. "When they first opened up, the parents didn't want to go to the school, and the teachers and the principal came here (to the Band office)."

SCHOOL CULTURE

Most groups commented that Aboriginal cultural issues tended not to be appropriately addressed in the culture of the school. Many felt that improving the representation of Aboriginal educators in the teaching and administrative ranks of school districts could improve this situation. They reasoned that students would be less likely to exhibit behavioural difficulties if the culture of the school was more attuned to their own experience, and that the presence of Aboriginal educators could impact on the school culture, provide positive role models, and increase the self-esteem of Aboriginal students.

ELEMENTARY-SECONDARY TRANSITIONS

Most groups identified the transition from elementary to secondary school as problematic for Aboriginal students. They attributed this to factors such as:

- Loss of a sense of community in larger secondary schools.
- Contradictions between the "subject-by-subject" organization of secondary schools and the Aboriginal approach to life which is more holistic, emphasizing inter-connectedness.
- A percieved tendency more prevalent in Secondary schools to respond to problem behaviours by suspension. They described this as creating a downward cycle in which the student gets further behind, further avoids school, gets further behind, and is more likely to act out, drop out, or both.

In some cases, suspension from one school results in the student not being allowed back into the same building, but having to enroll in another school. This "fresh start" creates its own set of adjustment problems but the original issues were described as not dealt with (for example, counseling needs or treatment for substance abuse.)

RESPONSE TO BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES AMONG ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

Ineffective Responses

Overwhelmingly, the focus groups identified suspension as a totally ineffective method for addressing behavioural issues. They saw it as a response intended to get rid of the problem for the school rather than help the student. Several focus groups held the view that suspension simply re-enforces unacceptable behaviour because students learn that if they engage in these behaviours they can "go home and watch TV and do what they like". Many commented that students in fact were being re-enforced for their negative behaviours through suspension.

The irony of suspending students for truancy was not lost in the discussions.

The implications of suspension in terms of disconnecting from school and subsequent escalating negative behaviours and eventually school drop-out were identified by several groups.

Effective Responses

One band took a pro-active and collaborative approach to dealing with suspensions in its work with the school district. They set up a program in the Band Office, staffed by band members, (generally elders) where students suspended from school would be sent rather than going home. Here, elders worked with them to develop some insight into the consequences of their behaviour and to the reasons for their responses. As well, the students were required to bring their school work with them and to complete it under supervision by band members rather than "going home to watch TV".

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL IN DEALING WITH SOCIAL ISSUES

Child Abuse and Neglect

In general, the focus groups varied considerably in their comfort level in discussing this issue and its relationship to behavioural disorders. In some groups, participants volunteered that this was an issue before the question was asked. In others, some participants denied that this was happening in their communities. Female participants were more likely to raise the issue or to identify or acknowledge it as a community problem that had a negative impact on children.

One participant commented about having been appointed to a task force to address social issues in the Aboriginal community in the area. "I was shocked – I had no idea these things were happening in my own community".

In one instance some members of the focus group commented that abuse prevention programs should not take place in schools. Other groups were generally supportive of prevention programs but were sometimes critical that these were not happening in their school. All believed that educators should report suspected abuse or neglect and recognized the legal obligation to do so, but there was considerable discomfort with the current reporting protocols. Some expressed the view that the involvement of the band could facilitate a healing process for both the abuser and the abused.

Substance Abuse

This factor arose in discussions as an issue often before the question was posed. Most focus groups recognize this reality, the need for their communities to address it, and the need for help in doing so. The lack of culturally appropriate approaches to treatment in the mental health system was seen as problematic by some.

Focus groups generally believed the school has an important role to play in helping students to recognize the inherent risks in substance abuse. They saw preventative efforts as particularly important as they relate to the prevention of FAS/FAE. Several groups mentioned that schools should particularly focus on helping children to develop an understanding at an early age of the negative effects of substance use and abuse, with a particular effort aimed at young women prior to their childbearing years.

In this connection, FAS/FAE was often mentioned as a major problem because of the behavioural difficulties inherent in the condition.

There was a striking lack of congruence between the extent to which both focus groups and district personnel identified this as an issue, the empirical evidence in the literature, and the lack of documentation of FAS/FAE in the files of the students reviewed. It is not clear whether this was an artifact of the sample or whether there was simply no documentation on file.

WHAT FOCUS GROUPS BELIEVE EDUCATORS NEED TO KNOW

The most consistent message was that the self-esteem of children is critical to their development and progress, and that behavioural problems are often linked to a lack of self-esteem. Lack of respect and understanding was seen as central to this issue.

The focus groups told us that by and large there was a lack of cultural competence in the education system and that the results were often misguided efforts to address Aboriginal culture. The attempts to build self-esteem were therefore less than effective.

Some groups mentioned the lack of awareness of educators generally of the economic circumstances in which many Aboriginal children live. Participation in team sports, field trips, etc. were seen as problems for many Aboriginal families because of the expense for their children's participation.

Stereotyping

We heard many examples of stereotyping. Some comments from focus groups exemplifying this issue were:

- "My child told me I had to come to school because they were having an Aboriginal Day and the teacher said they needed me to make bannock. Well, I don't know how to make bannock."
- Another person said "they have tried to bring in Aboriginal materials in the classroom - so we have sets of books that reflect the _____ culture. That is not meaningful to our kids in this region. They have to stop thinking that we are all the same".

- In yet another group, people said "An Aboriginal person from one area is not the same as from another. Prairie Aboriginal people are different. If they realize that, it would be a step. We have different ways of life".

Related to stereotyping was the issue of lowered expectations; Focus groups felt that in many instances educators tended not to expect much from Aboriginal children, and therefore not to challenge them.

Communication

Effective methods of communication between home and school were another area of common concern. These included written communications. Several groups pointed out that the parents may not have the appropriate literacy skills, and that use of educational jargon caused the parents to either not understand or to be unduly anxious. One parent commented about a note home to her neighbour seeking permission for a "psycho-educational assessment". The words frightened the parent and led to a high level of anxiety about what might be happening to her child.

Invitations to parent-teacher meetings often led to the expectation of hearing negative things about the child rather than mutual problem-solving. Consequently, several focus group members said, parents don't want to go to the school.

Invariably, personal communication in an informal setting was preferred to formal meetings/teacher conferences or written communication. Once parents were engaged in the problem-solving, however, they commented that they found the use of communication books for elementary children to be a helpful strategy.

Early Information and Intervention

Many focus group members commented that they were not told sufficiently early that their child was having academic or behavioural difficulties, and that the report cards reflected that the child was doing well. Often they were shocked to later learn that the difficulties had been of long-standing.

When students were moved along with their peers, parents often believed that their child was performing at the grade level at which they had been placed. Only much later they learned that the skill level of their child was well below that expected for grade placement. We frequently heard the query "if they knew for so long that the child was in trouble, why was I not told and why was nothing done?"

Several focus groups questioned the wisdom of moving children forward when they did not have the skills to be successful at the next grade.

Finding Strengths

Several focus groups members emphasized the strengths of Aboriginal children based on their cultural heritage. They observed that schools tend to focus on weaknesses rather than drawing on these strengths in building self-esteem, and urged that the education system do more to emphasize these strengths. The artistic ability of many Aboriginal students was an example frequently cited.

Some participants pointed out that the traditional Aboriginal style of teaching was by demonstrating how something is done and then coaching the children to try it for themselves. This form of active learning was seen as important to success among Aboriginal students.

Opening Doors

In districts where teachers and administrators made the effort to meet Aboriginal parents "on their own turf" - at their homes or at the Band Office or perhaps at the Friendship Centre, comments tended to be much more positive. These initially often involved the Aboriginal Support Worker to encourage the parents to attend (or in some cases to open the door) until trust relationships had been established.

WHAT FOCUS GROUPS BELIEVE ABORIGINAL PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

Parenting Skills

Virtually every group emphasized the need for enhancing parenting skills.

Some of the experiences described were poignant illustrations of how parenting skills and self-esteem had been lost through the residential school process. One woman said "In the residential school, the adults were distant and almost never touched us. It took me years before I understood that it was important to give your kids a hug and tell them that you love them. I just never saw that in the school when I was growing up". Others described their lack of a sense of family life and the development of adult-child relationships in a family context because of the institutional nature of the residential schools. One participant observed "I didn't know how families were supposed to work - not Aboriginal families and not white families either." Some described how sibling relationships were discouraged - "My little brother was frightened and crying and I wanted to comfort him, but the girls were in one area and the boys in another and we were not allowed to mix or talk to each other. So I grew up not talking to my brother."

These instances were described, not as complaints, but as illustrations of the current need for intensive work in the development of positive parenting skills in many Aboriginal communities and the need to re-build ways of connecting families and communities.

In two districts, focus groups described school district personnel taking an active role in running programs in the Aboriginal community designed to help parents learn how to help their child in school. In one of these districts, it was supplemented with the "Nobody's Perfect" parenting program at the insistence of one Band Council member as part of the Band's activities.

Maintaining Cultural Identity and Instilling a Sense of Pride

Participants frequently observed that being reluctant to admit Aboriginal status was rooted in a lack of a sense of pride in their culture and an expectation that they would be put down or treated less well if it were known that they were Aboriginal. They saw it as a positive sign that more students are now self-declaring their Aboriginal status, and also saw an important parental role in giving their children a strong sense of themselves and their heritage.

Peoples who have experienced or sensed that there has been an attempt to extinguish their culture feel even more passionately than most about keeping their cultures alive and thriving. Aboriginal people in the focus groups communicated this passion in very clearly, and recognized that both the Aboriginal community and the wider society (and schools as representative of that wider society) bear some responsibility for achieving this.

Knowing How to Work with the School

Also identified was a need to learn how to work with the school and be an effective advocate for your child. The historical fear of school as an institution and deference to school personnel were seen as barriers to effective communication and advocacy. This was seen as especially important when the student was encountering behavioural problems, which needed to be addressed co-operatively.

Parents often described their feelings of inadequacy in dealing with educators. Some felt patronized or talked down to in their dealings with school personnel. Several described their own journeys in trying to be more assertive in dealing with their children's educational needs and their struggles to overcome their deference in dealing with authority figures.

One parent commented: "I volunteered for a while in my daughter's class and it helped me to get to know the teacher and also the other kids in the class that my daughter would talk about. I initially had a bad impression of the teacher, but once I got to know her I saw it differently."

Given the importance of parental participation in the IEP planning process, the fear and reluctance of Aboriginal parents poses a major challenge to meaningful collaboration in the process.

Setting Expectations for Children and Youth

A number of participants in focus groups reflected on their own childhood and related stories of lack of appropriate role models, alcohol abuse and violence in the home, and the negative impact which this had on their own schooling. They identified the need for parents to emphasize the importance of educational attainment, and of setting conditions where their children have a reasonable chance of meeting these expectations. Interest in and discussion about what they are learning in school, support for homework, and participation in school events were examples given by some participants of ways in which they themselves had tried to support their childrens' schooling.

The notion of hope in the future and a vision of what their children have the potential to become were seen as important messages from parents. The concern was whether parents who see little hope for themselves are capable of providing this for their children. The impact of living in conditions of poverty was seen as a major barrier to creating this dynamic.

Utilizing the Aboriginal Support Worker

Aboriginal support workers were often seen as effective go-betweens to improve home-school communication. However, there was a qualitative difference between those support workers who saw their job as message-carrier and those who saw their job as encouraging Aboriginal parents and supporting them while they acquired the skills needed to communicate directly with the school.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

OPEN AND TRANSPARENT PROCESSES

Dealing with issues of difficult behaviour and the complexities around it requires that there be a high level of trust between the Aboriginal community and the school district. To achieve this, it is necessary to ensure that communication flows freely and that processes followed are transparent.

The question of use of targeted funds seems to be a test of trust level in some communities. Those districts that have "opened the books" not only in terms of the accounting system but also in terms of seeking Aboriginal community advice and encouraging them to have a stake in the decision-making about the use of these resources seems to have been an important step in some districts.

It is also important that representatives to these committees/councils act on communicating their involvement to the larger community to build support for the decisions which are taken.

Once these higher-level trust issues are addressed, it becomes easier to work together on the more difficult issues of inappropriate behaviour, truancy, and other social issues faced by the Aboriginal community in an open way, and to come together to try to deal with them.

INVOLVEMENT OF THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY IN SOLUTION-FINDING

The problems faced by the 150 students whose files were reviewed are pervasive and complex and we believe they are representative of the Aboriginal students reported with severe behaviour disorders.

While there are things that schools can do to intervene more effectively to support their students, it is difficult to imagine the level of resiliency required for these to be successful in the face of the chaotic lives, which many of them experience outside of school.

The most effective districts in terms of higher rates of school completion and lower rates of students reported with behaviour disorders appear to be those in which

- responsibility is acknowledged and shared,
- both the Aboriginal community and the school district openly admit that they could do better
- there are co-operative efforts to improve and
- district and community are bringing their collective resources together to do what they can with what they have.

The least effective districts in dealing which these issues are those in which energy in the Aboriginal community is focused on blaming the school system, with minimal acknowledgment of the complex dynamic, some of which occurs in the school and some of which occurs in the home and community.

In some instances, the preparedness of the Aboriginal community to openly address issues such as substance abuse and child abuse and neglect forms a barrier to addressing the issues which their most vulnerable children face at school.

DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Regardless of their background or current circumstances, one of the attributes of a good educational system is relevance for the student. This means, among other things, seeing themselves, their families, their communities, and their cultures reflected in their school environment in ways that are meaningful to their own lives. This is equally true for students of Aboriginal heritage.

Interviews with district personnel suggest that the majority of districts understand the need for cultural knowledge, awareness and sensitivity. Fewer districts have moved to the next level, which is defined in the literature as cultural competency. Empirical research suggests that this is a process, not an event. Aboriginal focus groups describe the struggles over time to move toward cultural competency in their school districts. The components along the way are:

> *Cultural knowledge* refers to familiarization with selected cultural characteristics, history, values, belief systems and behaviours of members of another ethnic group. (Adams, 1995).
>
> *Cultural Awareness* means the development of sensitivity and understanding of another ethnic group. This usually involves internal changes in terms of attitudes and values. Awareness and sensitivity also refer to the qualities of openness and flexibility that people develop in relation to others. Cultural awareness must be supplemented with cultural knowledge. (Adams, 1995).
>
> *Cultural Sensitivity* means knowing that cultural differences as well as similarities exist, without assigning values, i.e., better or worse, right or wrong, to those cultural differences (National Maternal and Child Health Center on Cultural Competency, 1997)
>
> *Cultural competence* is defined as a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). Cultural competency emphasizes the idea of operating *effectively* in different cultural contexts. It goes beyond knowledge, awareness and sensitivity and into a congruent set of actions at an operational level.

As with any systemic change, this requires both a "top-down" and "bottom-up" approach. (Fullan, 1993) and strong leadership (Fullan, 1993, Sparks, 1995, Gursky, 1986.)

"Shared Learnings" – a resource produced by the British Columbia Ministry of Education my be a helpful starting point for school districts in the development of cultural competency as it relates to the education of Aboriginal children.

RECRUITMENT OF PERSONNEL

There is general agreement that the workforce in the education system should represent the cultural differences of the student population. Recruitment of professionals with Aboriginal heritage is necessary to address the imbalance that currently exists in the B.C. education system to provide validation for the Aboriginal children in our schools of who they are and support their emotional development.

This will be particularly challenging in an environment of teacher shortage, but may also provide an opportunity for the system to adjust the cultural balance of the workforce.

IN-SERVICE TRAINING

Both school district personnel and the Aboriginal community recognize that current in-service approaches tend to reach the teachers already have an interest in the topic of teaching to culturally diverse populations.

Given the difficulties in finding time for in-service, this is unlikely to change unless there is agreement to give the issue priority as a way of addressing the lack of success of Aboriginal students in general in British Columbia, their disproportionate representation in programs for students with behaviour disorders, and the disproportionate resources that students with difficult behaviours require.

It is important that teachers and administrators increase their understanding of

- how to implement modifications in practice that better address the characteristics of Aboriginal students who are a at risk or who have already developed emotional/behavioural difficulties and
- how to create a welcoming school atmosphere in which Aboriginal students feel valued, respected, and physically and psychologically safe.

INVOLVING PARENTS

Research regarding the importance of parent involvement in the education of their children suggests that it is an important component in successful intervention for students with behavioural problems. Parent involvement can occur on many levels. Most important, however, is open communication with parents about the issues their children face and about their academic progress.

We noted that when parents did not have the capacity to collaborate, there was usually another family member (often a grandparent) who acted as a surrogate. These family members need to be involved as part of the solution.

The absence of parental involvement in pre-referral intervention and in the planning process or their relegation to the role of signing a consent form rather than actively participating in the planning process suggests that attention to this issue is an area for potential positive impact.

Aboriginal support workers can act as family liaisons or advocates to strengthen the role and empowerment of family members in their children's education provided that this role is clearly understood by all parties.

EARLY IDENTIFICATION AND INTERVENTION

Well-established patterns of disruptive behaviour during early years dramatically increase the risk for later antisocial behaviour. (Huesmann et al 1984; McCord 1991; Tremblay et al 1994.) Research and practice strongly suggest that opportunities for intervention with difficult behaviours are most effective prior to the age of 8 and that beyond that age programs are more likely to serve a containment rather than a rehabilitative function. This is not to suggest that later efforts are not important, but only that greater effect can be produced at earlier ages.

Early attention to learning needs to produce academic success can help to reduce the intensity of some behavioural problems. However, it is equally important to intervene to address behavioural issues early. These two objectives are not mutually exclusive.

Because attendance is also a factor, working with families early to avoid attendance problems is another element of an early intervention strategy.

When compared to what research tells us, the pattern of intervention in the files of these students is one of too little too late. While there was often academic intervention in the early stages, there did not appear to be a parallel process for addressing the behavioural issues at the same time, and the behaviour was well out of control before specific interventions were planned.

CAREFUL ASSESSMENT FOLLOWED BY FOCUSED STRATEGIES

Addressing behavioural difficulties effectively means that there is a careful analysis of the behaviour and precision in describing what occurs, when, and under what conditions. A holistic approach to the assessment of behaviour is a central issue. We note that currently, assessment of behaviour as recorded in the student files, with some notable exceptions, tends to be anecdotal, non-systematic, and almost random.

To deal with behavioural issues effectively, it is necessary to contextualize the behaviour, to understand something of the child's circumstances beyond the school, and to develop individualized strategies which are clearly focussed on the behaviour in ways which allow students to develop new behavioural repertoires. Systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of these strategies and a "course correction" in the plan constitute essential elements of this process.

Of critical importance at the secondary level is to develop alternatives to suspension. Some examples of these are already available in resource form from the Ministry of Education.

EFFECTIVE CROSS-DISCIPLINARY TEAMWORK

Some districts have developed an effective network, which begins to engage other disciplines and agencies in a solution-finding way. In other cases, we saw other agencies engaged for what appeared to be a need to meet criteria for funding, but that the involvement could not be said to be co-ordinated, collaborative, or integrated with the educational planning for the student.

In the development of local protocol agreements for inter-ministry services, this is an important point for discussion. In addition, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry for Children and Families will need to work together to remove policy barriers to the development of wrap-around services for these students.

There is also potential for improved co-ordination with agencies in the community designed to work with Aboriginal families. We saw evidence of a high level of communication and service integration in some instances, and almost none in others.

BUILDING RESILIENCY

"Resilience skills" include the ability to form relationships (social competence), to problem solve (metacognition), to develop a sense of identity (autonomy), and to plan and hope (a sense of purpose and future). (Benard, 1997.)

Research and practice are replete with themes around the importance of a single individual, often a teacher, in making a difference to the life of a student with multiple risk factors. Educators can play an important role by providing, within the school, for three protective factors:

1. ***Caring and Supportive Relationships***

   A key finding from resilience research is that successful development and transformative power exist not in programmatic approaches per se but at the deeper level of relationships, beliefs, and expectations, and willingness to share power.

   Certain programmatic approaches, however, can provide the structure for developing these relationships, and for providing opportunities for active student involvement: small group process, cooperative learning, peer helping, cross-age mentoring, and community service.

2. ***Positive and High Expectations***

   Staff in schools can be resources to at-risk children and offer them alternative perceptions of themselves, as well as teaching them skills for getting along in the world. (Wallach, 1994).

   Classroom approaches to helping children develop resiliency include:

   - teaching to students' strengths rather than their deficiencies, to provide a hopeful frame of mind
   - helping them to recognize how their own conditioned thinking (such as they are not good enough or smart enough) blocks access to their innate resilience

3. Opportunities for Meaningful Participation

These strategies, identified in multiple studies, and summarized by Benard (1997) include:

- providing growth opportunities such as asking questions that encourage self-reflection, critical thinking and consciousness, and dialogue (especially around salient social and personal issues);
- providing opportunities for creative expression in art, music, writing, theater, video production, and for helping others (community service, peer helping, cooperative learning);
- involving students in curriculum planning and choosing learning experiences;
- using participatory evaluation strategies; and
- involving students in creating the governing rules of the classroom.

KEEPING STUDENTS AT SCHOOL

School attendance is a factor in learning. Strategies to minimize time lost in instruction because of non-attendance require maintenance of easily accessible attendance records and early intervention when attendance problems develop.

Particularly at the secondary level, many students with behavioural disorders lose instructional time because of multiple suspensions. Alternatives to suspension which maintain the student's educational program need to be developed for many of these students as part of the intervention strategy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

PARTNERING WITH SCHOOL BOARDS

Efforts to build meaningful partnerships to address issues exist but these are sometimes hampered by a lack of trust. Aboriginal communities have many strengths that they can bring to bear to improve the success of their children in school and reduce the level of problem behaviours. This was demonstrated in a number of examples, which we saw in this study. To get to this point, however, it seemed necessary for the Aboriginal community to identify what these strengths are in their own particular case and to bring them forward in discussion with school boards.

PARENTING SKILLS

Parenting practices have important effects on a child's social and cognitive outcomes and on the likelihood that a child is vulnerable in some way. (Chao and Willms, 1998). The loss of parenting models and the lack of development of parenting skills as a result of residential schooling is problematic for Aboriginal communities. Their efforts to rebuild the level of parenting skill through parent training are important in addressing the behavioural problems of their children.

Encouragement from parents or other family members has been reported as the single factor that contributes most to high academic achievement in some Aboriginal groups (Ridone,1988). Helping students to have a goal and to look beyond the moment is an important task for families, communities, and educators.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Child development research has established that the rate of human learning and development is most rapid in the preschool years. Timing of intervention becomes particularly important when a child runs the risk of missing an opportunity to learn during a state of maximum readiness. If the most teachable moments or stages of greatest readiness are not taken advantage of, a child may have difficulty learning a particular skill at a later time.

In particular, the development of language, whether in the Aboriginal language or in English, is important in early development of the child. Educators tell us that Aboriginal children often enter school without the necessary repertoire of language skill required to be successful. Children who are competent in one language have a better chance of developing competency in a second language, particularly when they are young.

The gap in the development of language currently places Aboriginal students at a disadvantage from the beginning. What we saw as a common pattern in the student files was that of a child who initially had difficulty with the pre-reading skills needed to begin the task of academic learning. This initial gap was difficult to close, and in fact widened over time, and in many cases we saw a pattern of escalating behavioural difficulties as the students fell further and further behind.

In addition, the behavioural demands of the classroom and the playground require the ability to co-operate with others and to communicate feelings and wishes in an appropriate verbal fashion. Research evidence suggests that children who lack these language skills at school entry resort to behaviours such as physical aggression, bullying and interruption of other children's activities. This in turn leads to peer rejection and escalating behaviour problems. Student files illustrated many examples of this.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

There is a well-established relationship between school attendance and achievement. Parents can impact the attendance of their children, particularly at young ages. The attendance records of the students in this study suggest that Aboriginal communities can focus increased attention on ensuring that their children do not have prolonged and frequent unexplained absences from school. Since school absence is often a sign of other problems it is an important indicator for communities to attend to in support of families as well as a potential focus for discussion between the Aboriginal community and school boards.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

Recruitment

To create a teaching force which is more representative of the students served by the education system, it is important that a supply of teachers of Aboriginal origin be available. To address this need, teacher education programs in collaboration with other education partners will need to renew efforts at recruitment of Aboriginal students into the colleges of education and related disciplines.

Program Content

This study underscores the need to examine some important areas in teacher preparation: First, there is a need to include in the curriculum an understanding of cultural diversity and the methodologies for making classrooms more culturally relevant. Second, because addressing behaviour is essential to maintaining a safe and healthy learning environment, teachers need a repertoire of skills related to assessment of problem behaviours and intervention strategies. Third, there is a need to develop a skill set that will help teachers to work more effectively with parents in collaborative ways to prevent behaviour and learning difficulties and to address them when they arise.

CONCLUSION

This research confirms much of what is already known in empirical research and reflected in the collective wisdom of the Aboriginal community and of school district personnel in the districts that we visited.

What is new is that we have been able to examine the school lives of 149 students seen to have significant behavioural difficulties and to examine the variables in their schooling in ways that have not to date been done.

The most significant finding is that those districts that most closely adhere to what is described in the literature as good educational practice are also those districts that appear to have the most success in the education of Aboriginal learners and the lowest rate of behavioural problems. They tend to:

- have open relationships with the Aboriginal community
- encourage staff to reach out to the Aboriginal community
- have expectations for Aboriginal students that are in keeping with all other students in the system
- recognize cultural diversity in the school culture and traditions
- use creative and pro-active methods for staffing to include Aboriginal people
- emphasize the role of Aboriginal support workers in providing academic and behavioural support as part of the school-based team
- create a welcoming environment for parents and children in the school
- keep parents informed and involved
- identify problem behaviours earlier
- conduct careful and thorough assessment of student strengths and needs using a combination of classroom-based criterion-referenced assessment, functional assessment and standardized assessment
- have a high degree of precision in describing problem behaviours and developing strategies to address them
- develop careful individual plans, review them regularly, and systematically monitor progress
- use a team approach to problem-solving
- network with community agencies and pro-actively include them in planning for the child